

Children capturing images of AIDS

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NEW YORK (AP) -- More than 2 million children around the world live with the AIDS virus and fewer than 5 percent are being treated.

Now, hundreds of youths in India, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Romania and Mexico are picking up cameras to record images of lives disrupted by the disease.

"My responsibility is to help these children - especially if their parents left them by the side of the road," said Meroz Pillarisetty, 13, whose photographs are part of a New York exhibit, "Picturing Hope: Through Their Eyes."



"They come to my house, we play computer games, eat lunch together."

The exhibit, running through Jan. 8 at the Asia Society, is named after the "Picturing Hope" project started by Craig Bender, a 40-year-old American photographer based in Amsterdam, Netherlands, who worked as a photographer for the Abbott Fund.

"I would enter villages in India and Africa and see these lost children," he said. "Sometimes, their parents have died of AIDS, and they had to become adults overnight."

Bender gave the youths 35mm point-and-shoot cameras he had bought two years ago for \$12 each from a wholesaler.

The 14 photographers on show are from the southeastern Indian city of Vijayawada and surrounding villages; three were in New York to open the exhibit, which is to travel to the countries involved in the project next year.

Meroz helped translate for Revathi Kalaganti, a 16-year-old whose teenage brother died of AIDS, and who is now taking care of her HIV-positive parents.

"I used photography to get through my brother's death. I started taking pictures of children in my village, because that helped me feel closer to my brother," said Kalaganti, speaking in her native Telugu language.

Bender said he saw his photography as "an opportunity to give children a voice, through powerful images." During a five-day basic course, "We talk to them about their emotions and sharing them. They write and journal. And they go from being very introverted to being extroverted."

Feelings are transformed into photos that show neighbors, friends and relatives at home or outdoors, in scenes from tough daily lives that persist despite AIDS.

"Picturing Hope" photographs grace the walls of a community-based home in Vijayawada operated by the Indian nonprofit organization Vasavya Mahila Mandali, where almost 800 HIV-positive children live, get medical care and are educated.

Some of the center's support comes from the Abbott Fund, an Illinois-based philanthropy that is spending \$100 million in five years to help 140,000 children affected by AIDS in developing countries, either directly or through their families. That includes 47,000 in India, according to Reeta Roy, spokeswoman for the fund, which is also sponsoring the photography project.

Worldwide, at least 2 million children under age 15 are HIV-positive, according to the United Nations. Some are orphaned, partly because of the stigma and ignorance attached to AIDS, Bender said, and partly because some parents don't have the means to care for them.

"I spent many days starving," says Ramu Pothala Venkata, a 19-year-old who survived the streets of Vijayawada with a sexually transmitted infection, not HIV.

His camera captured "rag pickers" - street children who collect garbage to sell for recycling. Most of India's street children have never been tested for the HIV virus.

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