

Kerry Olson's Speech for Global AIDS Convening

San Francisco, CA November 12th, 2002

The following speech was presented by Kerry Olson, President and Founder of Firelight Foundation, at the West coast premier screening of Rory Kennedy's documentary film, PANDEMIC: Facing AIDS. The event was sponsored by the Global Philanthropy Forum, and preceded a day-long gathering of foundation leaders, individual donors, NGOs, and significant HIV/AIDS scholars who met to discuss opportunities for international philanthropy geared to changing the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Pandemic: Facing AIDS is a powerful documentary film (produced by Moxie Firecracker Films, in association with The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and HBO) that follows the personal stories of people from five countries who are living with AIDS, cutting through the overwhelming statistics and putting a human face on the global epidemic. The film will be aired on HBO in the Spring of 2003. Learn more about the film and related projects at <http://www.pandemicfacingaids.com>.

Good evening everyone. It is an honor to be here. In particular, it is an honor to have been asked to say a few words in introduction to Rory Kennedy's film, Pandemic: Facing AIDS. I would like to thank Jane Wales and the staff at Global Philanthropy Forum for organizing Global AIDS Convening and for graciously including Firelight Foundation in the planning of tonight's event. I had the privilege to view the world premiere of this amazing documentary in Barcelona this summer, at the International Conference on HIV/AIDS. It is a good thing that I am opening, rather than closing the film, because this moving portrayal of the human face of the AIDS pandemic leaves me speechless.

Rory's film addresses a great need that we have to better understand the impact of AIDS on two important fronts: the personal and the global. We are confronted with individual stories behind the statistics, and with how these stories are shaped by their cultural context. The statistics regarding AIDS are known to all of us. They are unprecedented and they are overwhelming. The statistics shock us and stop us in our tracks. When I first heard that 12 million children had been orphaned by AIDS, 90%

of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa, I felt both moved to act and helpless to do anything.

This is why the individual stories are so needed. Because the truth is, most stories of people living with AIDS are not only stories of devastation and loss, they are also stories of hope, courage, and action in the face of crisis. Rory's film captures this truth with a startling degree of intimacy, as she shares the stories of a recently married truck driver in India, a former sex worker in Thailand, a group of orphans in Uganda, a couple who have contracted AIDS through IV drug use in Russia, and a young gay man in Brazil.

Together, these stories bring the global impact of AIDS home to us. The lives of these individuals move us in a way that numbers simply cannot. It is difficult to walk away. Facing AIDS raises critical questions for each and every one of us, not the least of which is, "What does it mean to be a global citizen in this time and place?" How will we choose to respond?

I have been asked to share with you the story of why Firelight decided to help fund this film. When I first learned of Rory's project early in 2000, Firelight Foundation was in its infancy. We had yet to receive our first round of proposals from Africa, and I was anxious to begin getting money out the door. Our grantmaking focus from the beginning has been to offer small grants to grassroots organizations that are addressing the needs and rights of children made vulnerable by AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Rory's proposed project was to produce a short film on the AIDS crisis in India, so this was not exactly a direct match with our mission. Her project was compelling, however, because I had seen her film "Epidemic Africa" at the UN Conference on Children Orphaned by AIDS in 1999. I knew that that film had been instrumental in raising awareness in Congress at a time of critical decision-making regarding AIDS funding.

One of the features of being a small, private foundation is that it is possible to act flexibly and to respond quickly when a real need arises. And given the need for greater awareness, increased funding, and heightened global mindedness with respect to AIDS, along with Rory's track record, this seemed like a good investment. So Firelight gave a small grant towards the production of the film, which subsequently gathered a great deal of momentum.

To make a long story short, with additional and much more substantial funding from The AOL Time Warner Foundation, HBO, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Doctors Without Borders, to name a few, Rory's project went from being a small documentary on AIDS in India to a feature length film covering five countries. In addition, her project was expanded to include the production of a music CD, a book, a web site, a traveling exhibition, and an education packet. Firelight's original grant was retargeted to support the education packet, which will be available next spring, as a tool to raise AIDS awareness in schools.

Given the final scope of this amazing project, I was surprised when I saw Firelight Foundation's name listed in the film's credits, alongside other larger funders. When I thanked Rory for her generous acknowledgement of Firelight, she responded that our grant was not insignificant. Our grant, though small in dollar amount compared with later funding, provided initial seed money at a time early on when outside support and a vote of confidence were especially needed and appreciated. As you can imagine, this was gratifying to hear. It also illustrates several key lessons that are more broadly applicable to many of us here tonight.

The first lesson is that there is room for everyone at the table. Whether you are an individual donor, a small private foundation, a large corporate foundation, or the UN Global Fund, you are needed and you have a critical role to play. When my husband and I started Firelight Foundation in 1999, we questioned whether a small family foundation could even begin to make a difference in addressing the needs of children

affected by AIDS in Africa. It has been almost three years since we asked that question, and in that time Firelight has awarded over 100 grants to community-based organizations serving children and families in ten African countries.

The second lesson is the need for collaboration. The broad scope and rapidly changing context of AIDS make it essential for us to talk to one another and to work together. This is as true for the donor community as it is for those working on the ground. Medical advances, policy changes, program innovations, and shifts in the funding landscape require us to stay mutually informed. Firelight Foundation has been able to accomplish what it has largely because of the strategic alliances that we have forged. Through working in partnership with other foundations and organizations addressing AIDS internationally, we have strengthened our understanding, developed our leadership, and multiplied our impact. These same benefits are extended to our grantee-partners when we support their need to network with one another. Firelight is currently collaborating with American Jewish World Service and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation to fund a partnership exchange enabling our grantees to visit one another's programs and to share their work.

The third lesson is to never underestimate the impact of seed funding for small, worthy projects. There is no question that stemming the tide of AIDS will take far greater resources than we have seen to date. However, it is also true that much of the battle against AIDS is being fought at the grassroots level, where relatively small dollar amounts can make an incredible difference. As donors, we need to be willing to engage in responsible risk-taking. We need to identify and build up better mechanisms for getting dollars to the ground. In Africa, there are thousands of community-based organizations that are responding, for example, to the needs of children orphaned and affected by AIDS. These organizations are mobilizing their communities and strengthening the traditional safety net of the extended family. They are keeping hope alive with a range of vital programs and services, including ensuring children's access to education, to psychosocial support, and to family care,

assisting their caregivers with income-generating activities, and providing AIDS prevention education. Firelight Foundation has learned so much from our African grantee-partners and we are honored to support their work. We have also found that, by and large, orphanages are not the answer. Institutional care is costly to maintain and fails to meet the developmental and long-term needs of young people. Given the vast number of children being orphaned by AIDS, investing in community-based initiatives is a more appropriate and effective approach.

The fourth and final lesson is the importance of recognizing everyone's contribution. At this moment, across the planet, there are thousands of unsung heroes working at the front lines of AIDS. They are the individuals with fire in their bellies and compassion in their hearts, leading their communities in the fight against AIDS and inspiring social change. They are the volunteers – in many cases the poor helping the destitute – who are visiting the homes of AIDS-affected men, women, and children, offering material support, home-based-care, and a listening ear. They are the people living with AIDS, living positively, standing up to stigma, and demanding their fundamental right to respect and access to treatment. They are the youth who are staying informed and informing others, promoting AIDS awareness and prevention with their voices and their choices. They are the children, who in their resiliency and in their need, remind us all of our responsibility to ensure their hope for the future. Please let us not forget the children...They are the future.

The film that you are about to see is, in many ways, a tribute to the unsung heroes. In closing, I would like to share with you Rory Kennedy's words regarding her vision for the film. She writes:

I like to think that Pandemic: Facing AIDS is not a film about defeat, though in the end, AIDS does kill. But rather, in watching these stories, my hope is that people will realize that we can beat AIDS. And whether it is one man speaking out in a village in India or a young Thai woman reclaiming her dignity as she breathes her last breath - each of us has something to contribute to this fight... Ultimately, we are members of

the same global community, and we must stand together. We must all put our shoulders firmly up against that rock that is AIDS and push - push back hard. And we must shout loudly, "AIDS will not destroy us!"

Thank you very much.

The Firelight Foundation, a small, family-initiated charitable foundation based in Santa Cruz, California. The founding mission of Firelight Foundation is to support the fundamental needs and rights of children struggling to grow up in the face of hardship. Specifically, Firelight provides small grants of \$500 to \$10,000 to grassroots organizations in 11 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that are working to meet the needs of children who are orphaned or affected by HIV/AIDS. Firelight's approach to grantmaking is child-centered, family-focused, and community-based. In addition to grantmaking, Firelight works to enhance its impact by developing strategic alliances within the international community of donors and governmental and non-governmental agencies; by fostering partnerships among its grantee-partner groups in Africa; and by raising public awareness and reaching out to donors.

For more information about Firelight Foundation and our grantee-partners, consult our website: <http://www.firelightfoundation.org>, or email us at info@firelightfoundation.org.

The Firelight Foundation
510 Mission Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060 USA
(phone) +831-429-8750
(fax) +831-429-2036