

Billy Raftery

A Step Towards Change

Be the change you want to see in the world". Ghandi's inspiring words are the essence of what resonates in the heart and mind of Billy Raftery. Six years ago on a move to Durban, South Africa, the 29 year old Columbia University graduate was faced with an exponentially growing issue; the insane high numbers of desolate and misguided street children living in extremely poor and dangerous environments. Raftery is one of the few that have opened their eyes to the gravity of the situation: "I would come home everyday to homeless children puffing and raising hell and it was absolute chaos but no one was batting their eyes at it". In collaboration with Tom Hewitt, one of the primary founders of Umthombo, a non-profit organization that aims to change the image of street children, Raftery created the **Children Rise Foundation**, attempting to take the children off the streets and place them into more civilized, healthier, and stable homes and communities.

A vast majority of these street children have fallen into these desperate circumstances in order to make a living and survive. Billy explains, "These kids get there for an array of reasons: abuse, neglect, extreme poverty, no food, no clothes, the parents tell their kids to go beg for money but then they stop coming home". In addition, the HIV orphan crisis results in a number of vulnerable and sensitive children that are swayed into a lifestyle they know no different from. One of the rising issues that strongly influence the children is the addiction to huffing glue. Glue is known to suppress appetite and fuel body heat becoming a good outlet for these children to escape their reality. Sadly, "these children live day by day, they don't know if tomorrow is going to come" but yet a sense of hope has arisen that keep the founders of the organization, including Billy, striving for the betterment of the lives of the children in Durban.

Inspired by the hope and the surprisingly strong and positive spirit of many of the children, Billy began filming a feature length documentary, "Children Rise", to use as an advocacy tool for Umthombo and assist in raising awareness throughout the world to the circumstances that these street children are living in. "The attitude of the kids and the hope you see in them, the hope they give off" gave Billy and his crew faith in initiating some kind of change. The film focuses on the struggles of two children in particular Zuleika, representing the girl's story, and Ariel, representing the boy's story. In essence, " Bill Raftery's film challenges viewers to look past the violent and often times graphic images of Durban's street kids and to see the homeless youth for what they are...children". In other words, the film is intended to shed light on the dark lives of the street kids.

High anticipation is held for the world premiere of this film, which is 90% completed out of competition. Hopefully this documentary will fuel activism. As Billy stated, "We are a global community and we need to start thinking that way and acting that way. We need to really acknowledge the problem and help out or intervene". Change starts with one person and as a human race we are obligated to take affirmative humanitarian action to help the neighbors surrounding us.

By Marcela Villegas Castañón

