

'PANDEMIC: FACING AIDS'
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PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

Documentarian
Rory Kennedy Puts
A Fresh, Harsh
Light on AIDS

'PANDEMIC: FACING AIDS'

Filmmaker Kennedy Puts Disease in Global Focus

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Filmmaker Rory Kennedy describes her five-part documentary series on the global impact of AIDS as the biggest project she has done, with the most difficult subject matter.

"For so many reasons, but by far the most difficult for me was getting to know people who are dying because of the circumstances of where they were born, circumstances that placed them where they cannot get help," she said.

The half-hour reports, narrated by Elton John, explore the crisis in Thailand, Uganda, Russia, Brazil and India. Through the stories of people living with AIDS, the series documents the treatment, prevention and stigma of the disease, and is the focus of a global education campaign to raise awareness for the crisis.

Kennedy, who directed and produced "Pandemic: Facing AIDS," decided to tackle the issue several years ago after she was invited to join a Clinton White House AIDS delegation to Uganda, Zambia and South Africa.

"I had seen firsthand the impact of the AIDS crisis, and had some sense of the gravity of it," she said. At that time she made a short film called "Epidemic Africa."

"But you can never fully prepare for the time you spend documenting the stories of people who you know will die an unnecessary death. This project was incredibly intense. I was so drained by it."

She calls the AIDS crisis "the most important issue facing our world today. With 40 million people HIV-positive, and that number will balloon, a lot of lives are at stake," she said. "It's entirely preventable. We know how to contain AIDS. We've seen it done in Uganda and Brazil. But the fact that we are not focusing on it means lives are being lost."

Kennedy, youngest daughter of the late Robert F. Kennedy, said AIDS has gone off the national radar partly because of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. "We were working on this project prior to that and a lot of major newspapers were focusing on this, had raised awareness. Politicians were talking about AIDS. But 9/11 changed the focus."

She was heartened by President Bush's



These young families in India and Russia struggling with the AIDS crisis are among those profiled in the HBO series "Pandemic: Facing AIDS" beginning on Sunday at 7.



SET PHOTO BY GARDNER/RETNA; RIGHT PHOTO BY ERIK F. FOSTER

announcement during the State of the Union address of support for a global AIDS program.

"I have to give President Bush a lot of credit," she said. "That \$15 billion over five years is significant. I hope that coming from the president, it will inspire others to take action, make it a priority."

Viewers who tend to think of AIDS and Africa may be surprised by segments on

of poverty in these countries, people here [in the United States] find hard to understand."

Kennedy said the full scope of AIDS in Russia has yet to sink in. "It's very unsettling, as the government denies there's an AIDS crisis in that country. And 90 percent of those who are HIV-positive are under age 28. At this rate of infection, one out of every three youths will be HIV-positive. That is taking out a generation."

The Russia segment follows Sergei and Lena, whose drug use left the young couple HIV-positive. They are struggling to raise their 3-year-old son, Nikita.

"Their story to me is so much about kids who were out of control, as many kids are, and are now paying for it with their lives," said Kennedy.

She believes the appearance of the series on HBO means it will reach a wider viewership than documentaries traditionally do.

"The audience of HBO is one that hasn't had that much exposure to this issue, and we really wanted to reach that different segment," Kennedy said.

Kennedy and her staff also worked with HBO to expand the project to include a photo exhibition and book, a Web site (www.facingaids.org), a music CD and an educational curriculum for high schools, with a 40-minute version of the film, a workbook and teacher's guide.

Kennedy, who gave birth to daughter Georgia eight months ago, said education is key to resolving the problem. "There are 13 million orphans as a result of AIDS," she said. "In 2010, it will be 40 million."

She said she is afraid most Americans do not see the face of AIDS. "They close their eyes," she said. "But they need to know it isn't ethnic or economic. AIDS gets everybody. All the people working on this issue work so hard. We can change the tide but we do need to get people's attention."



BY JENNIFER LINDNER

Rory Kennedy produced the documentary.

India and Russia in the series, which is why Kennedy included them.

"In India, the biggest problem is the basic lack of health care infrastructure," said Kennedy. She said even if drugs were available to someone who is HIV-positive, the lack of doctors defeats such an effort. "The only way for him to get to a doctor is to drive 14 hours," she said. "The cost of that is what he would earn in a month. The level