

Straight from the heart

What does the exceptional charity worker Simone Shindler see in Canadian children with AIDS? Hope.

by Danielle Groen
photograph by Shannon Ross

Brightly coloured canvases stretch across the walls in a midtown Toronto office. There are 15 of them, and every inch of their large frames is covered by paint and ribbon and string. There are words, too: “Stay strong,” “Get tested” and “You’ll survive – I did.”

This artwork was created by children ages 12 to 16, all affected by HIV. Most of them have parents who have the disease, and some are infected themselves. They collaborated on this project for nine weeks last year, gathering each Saturday to work diligently on one canvas, then another. And although the children were too young to attend the 2006 International AIDS Conference, their painted messages were part of the Envisioning the Future Symposium, held in the lead-up to the proceedings.

In September, these canvases were on display once more, electronically, in a video to introduce the 2007 recipient of the Clarins Dynamic Woman Award. Each year,

the prize recognizes an exceptional woman who helps children in danger, awarding a \$50,000 gift that is followed in subsequent years with a \$10,000 annual bursary. This year, the honour goes to Simone Shindler, program and counselling director of the Teresa Group, a Toronto charity staffed by seven people that serves over 350 families and 670 children living with HIV and AIDS.

Shindler’s office is overflowing with evidence of the Teresa Group’s numerous programs. A stack of evaluations teeters on her

desk, tracking improvements in the children’s academic performance. They have been filled out by 11 tutors, hired and trained by Shindler, as part of a program that the 45-year-old social worker introduced. In one corner, three cardboard boxes spill over with boots and shoes, recently collected for the clothing bank. Another corner is crowded with papier-mâché masks. “The kids wanted to make masks showing how they felt,” Shindler explains. “Many of them were about judgment and discrimination, feeling alone and feeling >



The Teresa Group's Simone Shindler, winner of the Clarins Dynamic Woman Award, with artwork by kids living with AIDS.

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The premise is simple: "We use art to help kids who are at risk."

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That's not all the group does. There's an Ontario-wide baby-formula program so that mothers who are HIV positive can have access to free formula for an entire year. Diapers, toys and birthday presents are routinely provided. Food is distributed every month, to help families prepare healthy meals and snacks. There's also a range of support groups, which Shindler oversees, for pregnant women, new moms and toddlers.

"Everything around those programs came from her," confirms the Teresa Group's executive director, Karen Vance-Wallace, who nominated Shindler for the Clarins award. "She is constantly coming up with new ways to address the needs of kids impacted by this disease."

WHEN SHINDLER STARTED AT THE Teresa Group nine years ago, she ran the nascent Leading the Way support group. The part-time position was ideal for a mother of three young children – Seth, now 16, daughter Jessie, 12, and Noah, 10. At the time, the program was only for kids aware of a family member's or their own HIV-positive status. Children unaware of the disease were babysat as their siblings or

parents attended the groups. "After my first year, it occurred to me that those kids were also experiencing behavioural and emotional problems," Shindler says.

Recognizing this, Shindler initiated a Leading the Way group for non-disclosed kids as well, providing counselling and support. The groups now run in tandem. Each session is focused around an activity: making masks, writing rap songs, painting canvases or creating a therapeutic garden.

"Initially, we were just planting trees, but the kids were really resistant to it," Shindler recalls. "They said to us, 'What's the point? Some tornado will just sweep the trees away, or a disease will come to get them.' It was all about themselves and their illness, so we had to switch to a new plan."

Shindler proposed the garden, guiding her choices by how the group was feeling. "Marigolds defend against disease and keep out predators. Pansies seem like a delicate flower but are actually quite hardy. We're not constantly talking about HIV and death >

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and grief, but the kids know what we're trying to say to them."

ADAPTABILITY IS A SKILL SHINDLER honed at an early age. The middle child of free-spirited parents, she moved to England at two, came back to Canada at 12, then finished high school in Israel. "My parents wanted to experience the world, so one day, I was shopping at a mall in Toronto, and the next, I was dropped off in the middle of the Negev desert and told this was where I'd be going to school."

Shindler returned to Toronto to study sociology. Two weeks into her Ph.D., however, she abandoned the degree in favour of a master's in social work. She recalls interviewing single-parent families: "I would hear things that really moved me, but my role was just to gather statistical information. I wanted to help, so I went into social work."

Her first job was with an agency for children with learning disabilities. When her husband, Gary, an insurance consultant, was transferred to Calgary, Shindler ran a clinic for kids with attention-deficit disorder. "It was a very structured program where parents paid for their children to come." She concedes that starting at the Teresa Group was an enormous adjustment. "Here, it's a very different population: There's poverty, immigration issues, housing issues."

An aching part of the job is the reality of AIDS. Parents die, and children contend with daily prejudice. At school, and often at home, these kids have no one to talk to. That's what brings them back to the Teresa Group again and again. "A boy lost his parent recently, and one of the first things he said at the funeral was, 'But I can come back to group, right?'" Shindler says. "What we're being told is that group is a safe place for them to fall."

She plans to use the \$50,000 from the Clarins award to start a centre for preschoolers affected by HIV and AIDS.

The greatest reward of her profession is seeing palpable changes. "When the children give you those massive grins, or when a child moves from expressing that he felt suicidal in one group to not feeling that way in the next, I know I've somehow made it better and easier for them to cope."

Shindler's job has made an impact on her own kids, too: This year, her younger son and daughter began fundraising in their school to help their mother's organization. "I want my kids to go to public school and see different people. I want them to be active and play on teams, because when you work in a field like this, you do not take life and good health for granted."

Shindler's ideas for improvement and aid continue to flow. She talks at length about the need for programming to keep high-risk youth ages 16 to 24 engaged and out of jail. With the prize money from Clarins, she will work with a committee to create an early childhood centre, so preschoolers affected by HIV can enter kindergarten in the best-equipped way.

"Simone sees hope in every single situation," Vance-Wallace says. That hope is making a difference for those who need it the most. •