

The Governor General's Caring Canadian Award



Norma Geggie

Wakefield, Quebec

In 1953, Norma Geggie came to Canada from her native Australia to fill a nursing position in the small town of Wakefield, Quebec.

In the 59 years since, she has enriched her own community and beyond by starting Canada's first 'granny group', which allowed grandmothers in Wakefield to help grandmothers in Africa who were raising their grandchildren left orphaned by AIDS.



Before hitting upon the idea for the Wakefield Grannies, Mrs. Geggie had already made a significant impact on her community. In addition to her role as a researcher, writer, editor and local historian, she worked with youth and as a literacy teacher. She created L'Armoire des artisans, a successful craft co-operative in the village that produced painted silks, pottery and woven materials. More recently, she led a group that worked with the municipality to establish two affordable housing projects for seniors; she is now helping to set up a palliative care centre. Long a committed member of the local United Church, Mrs. Geggie has advocated fearlessly for the rights and privileges of the gay community.

But it was in 2004 that Mrs. Geggie launched her famous 'grannies' project. Rose Letwaba, a psychiatric nurse from South Africa's Alexandra Township, had been invited to speak in Wakefield about the plight of South African grandmothers. These women were raising their orphaned grandchildren after their parents had died from AIDS. "What if 10 grandmothers from Wakefield partnered with 10 grannies from Alex?" Mrs. Geggie asked Mrs. Letwaba. From this conversation the Wakefield Grannies was born.

This group of 11 women, mostly grandmothers themselves, raised thousands of dollars in their communities for their South African counterparts, known as "Gogos". The idea, getting grandmothers to help grandmothers, soon spread across Canada. Two years later, on March 7, 2006, the Stephen Lewis

Foundation announced its Grandmother to Grandmother Campaign. There are now more than 140 grandmothers' groups across Canada and the movement has reached the U.S., New Zealand and Australia.

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Mrs. Geggie continues to be an active member of the Wakefield chapter. She has hosted Rose Letwaba and other Gogos in her home and speaks to Mrs. Letwaba by phone every few weeks. A highlight for Mrs. Geggie has been the chance to travel to Alexandra Township to meet with the Gogos at a showing of the film *The Great Granny Revolution*, created by Wakefield filmmakers Robert and Brenda Rooney, herself a member of the Grannies group.

The idea for *The Great Granny Revolution* evokes, for many, the memory of Gloria Steinem's famous words, "One day, an army of gray-haired women may quietly take over the Earth." For Mrs. Geggie though, it's about the volunteer experience. "You get to realize that with these horrendous situations, the only way to make a difference is just little by little. I hope it spreads worldwide."



The Caring Canadian Award was presented to Norma Geggie on April 17, 2012, at Rideau Hall.
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