

Stunning and quirky: Galway's newest hotel opens

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Galway couple to help build a haven for Aids orphans

Galway couple Dave Munn and Jo Brown, both 23, are soon to head off to live in a remote area of Africa as part of a small team planning to build an environmentally friendly day-care centre for the Aids orphans of Botswana. Jonathon Bell reports.

The flat and arid thorn scrub of Tshesebe, a village in sparsely-populated eastern Botswana, does not at first glance suggest an inviting spot to raise your children.

"The lie of the land is such that you end up doing a lot of walking," Dave Munn recalled of the area where he wants to build an orphanage, "and the heat out there can really wreck you." Making a worryingly large gesture with his fingers, he added in a tone of painful experience: "Those thorns get pretty big, too."

Along with his partner Joanne Brown and fellow volunteers Rick Hall and Lucie Glajcoma, plus the contribution of Ireland-based artists Deborah Donnelly, Jim Kavanagh and Bernie Prendergast, Munn dreams of putting an Aids orphanage in the desert hardscrabble of Tshesebe.

Their charity initiative Top Banana (banana in this case being the Botswanan word for youth), currently seeking donations in Galway, hopes to break earth on their orphanage project early in the spring of next year.

Medical crisis

The remote and peaceful village of Tshesebe is an object

of about 150,000 children have been orphaned by Aids in Botswana, many of whom receive scant attention amidst the devastation caused by the disease.



Dave Munn and Jo Brown, who are to help build an environmentally friendly day-care centre for the Aids orphans of Botswana. As part of their fundraising efforts, three paintings will be raffled on December 13 in Bold Art Gallery in Galway city. Tickets are €5 and can be purchased by calling 085-1613348.

example of a medical crisis afflicting Botswana: the human immunodeficiency virus HIV.

An as-yet incurable virus, HIV has been carried along trucking routes and patterns of migration throughout the African continent, and among other things it has orphaned children: about 150,000 in Botswana, Munn estimates, many of whom receive scant attention amidst the devastation caused by the disease.

The Top Banana concept took flight in 2003, when Munn and Hall got acquainted during an HIV/AIDS project that began in Denmark.

"Rick wanted a challenge," Munn remembers, "and we sorted of joined forces going out to Botswana that year - we organised workshops and got

into the villages and we ended up working on a glamour magazine for men that featured different (clothed) women each week, with the idea of encouraging, shall we say, alternatives to promiscuity.

"Africans love beauty contests, and we were also using it as a voice to talk about HIV/AIDS. It was just a wacky idea that might have worked." (The jury is still out!)

The rocky road to Top Banana also included "a chicken shed project for a woman with eight kids and her husband who lived in a very run-down area of Francistown. Part of our job, along with spreading information, was to motivate people to come up with small business ideas. It was an atmosphere of brainstorming"

It was an atmosphere conducive to an idea like Top Banana. Says Munn's partner Jo Brown: "Rick wanted to move out to Botswana - he was very concerned, obviously, about the plight of the kids there, and he got talking to the district commissioner who got him the land at Tshesebe to use for this purpose. It was as simple as that."

Art raffle

Working in Galway's Bold Art Gallery, where Donnelly, Kavanagh and Prendergast all exhibit work, Munn first broached the idea of an art raffle with Kavanagh. By the end of the summer the other artists, plus gallery owner Hazel Hendy, had gotten on board.

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On Tuesday, December 13, the three pieces of original art will be given away in a raffle at Bold Art Gallery. The group has printed up 1,500 tickets with the help of Ann Leyden at Galway's Upstairs Downstairs Magazine, available for a minimum donation of €5 each.

Said Munn: "Who'd have thought that art could become so important for basic social problems far away in Africa? But these three paintings can make the difference between being looked after by professional carers, for some kids, and being looked after by neighbours, or neglected, or worse. These artists could sell their paintings easily here in Galway. None of them are particularly rich people. They've taken a lot on their shoulders by doing something like this."

Gallery owner Hendy said: "Africa has a place in my heart, I've been to South Africa once, and I'll be travelling again to Tanzania for my honeymoon. Obviously it's very sad to know that so many ordinary people in that part of the world suffer from AIDS, and I think what Dave and Jo are planning to do for the kids in Botswana is very admirable. And my message for



The site of the planned day-care centre for Aids orphans in Botswana.

the youth there is: Be young, be smart and be bold - use condoms!

"Jo and Dave are doing a good thing by going out there; it takes some balls to take on something like this, and it's going to save lives," agreed Kavanagh. "I really wanted to help when I found out about the project, and I'm very glad that it's come to this."

Fellow artist Donnelly said: "I'm a mother, and it hurts to imagine what's happening to so many African families."

Bernie Prendergast, mother of three, is similarly full of praise for the project: "I thought it sounded like a good project and I think Dave and Jo

are very brave going to Africa to start such a big project".

Dave and Jo plan to be out in Botswana in April 2006, although the arrival date depends largely on funding of the project. As this is a not-for-profit venture, they are reliant solely on donations from the hearts of the western world.

Anyone who would like to help out with this project can contact Jo or Dave on info-topbanana@yahoo.co.uk More information on the project can be found at www.tshesebeorphanproject.blogspot.com or through www.boldartgallery.com