

ONE MAN'S MISSION

STEPHEN LEWIS KNOWS HOW IMPORTANT HOPE IS IN THE MIDST OF DESPAIR. HE HAS EMBRACED – AND LAUGHED WITH – AFRICAN CHILDREN ORPHANED BY THE HIV/AIDS EPIDEMIC. AS A HUMANITARIAN, LEWIS HOLDS ON TO ONE HOPE ABOVE ALL ELSE: THAT THE WORLD WILL PAY ATTENTION TO THE SUFFERING OF 25 MILLION PEOPLE.

BY MARCIA KAYE

Stephen Lewis's hands are a manicurist's nightmare. All 10 nails are bitten way below the quick and almost to the half-moons, exposing oddly naked flesh. Today, one fingertip is sporting a bandage where his obsessive nail-biting has gone a little too far. His wife, journalist Michele Landsberg, sighs resignedly: "There have been days when he's had three Band-Aids on each hand."

Whenever Lewis sits on a podium waiting his turn to give a speech – as he did this morning and as he does at least 20 times a month – his hands are never still. He pulls an ear, rubs his nose, surreptitiously gnaws a fingertip, jams his hands into his pockets. He's not nervous; he's itching to get up to the lectern. When he finally does, his hands become even more animated, outstretched in a plea, curled into fists of frustration, often accidentally whacking the microphone as he gets carried away with the urgency and passion of his message.

In the past four years, since Lewis became the United Nations special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, there has been a lot for these hands to agitated about. These are the same hands that have touched so many Africans affected by the pandemic – not just touched the emotionally but held their hands as they lay dying. Many of them are young women in their 20s or 30s, writhing in pain on the floor of a hut, emaciated, sometimes covered with sores, too ill to speak, while their bewildered children stand and watch. These same hands of his have embraced hundreds of children orphaned by the pandemic, children who suddenly become street kids or prostitutes or the head of their household at the tender age of eight or nine. And these hands recently danced with a 73-year-old grandmother who, having buried her adult children, is now struggling to raise 13 grandchildren. Lewis was *dancing* with her because even in the midst of the despair, there's dancing and singing and glimmers of hope. And that's what keeps Stephen Lewis going.

And going. For Lewis never stops. At an age when most people are coasting into retirement, the 67-year-old Lewis is working longer and harder than ever before, doing a job that not even Sisyphus would apply for. His mission: to get the rest of the world to pay attention to the more than 25 million people in sub-Saharan Africa who have HIV/AIDS. With 2.3 million dying a year, Africa experiences the equivalent of a tsunami a month.

"It's certainly the most difficult job I've ever had," says Lewis, whose CV contains no shortage of challenging jobs: deputy executive director of UNICEF, Canadian ambassador to the United Nations and leader of Ontario's New Democratic Party. "It's the most emotionally wearing and intellectually brutal and physically demanding of any job I've ever done."

The Toronto-based Lewis travels almost continually. He'll say, "When I was speaking in New York yesterday..." or "Two Saturdays ago in Lesotho..." or "When I go to Malawi on Monday..." He's often described as tireless, but in truth he's so dramatically sleep-deprived and jet-lagged that when he recently stopped moving long enough to sit down and cuddle his newborn grandson, he almost fell asleep.

As if he wasn't busy enough, two years ago he added another sideline. Frustrated with the glacial pace of government response to the pandemic, he created the Stephen Lewis Foundation to bring solace and hope at a grassroots level to people living and dying with AIDS. Increasingly, those people are women. In cultures of extreme gender inequality, women, whether married or not, are unable to say no to sex or to insist on condoms. That's why more than three-quarters of 15-to-24-year-olds infected in sub-Saharan Africa are female. In many areas, women and girls are becoming an endangered species.

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The need for help is dramatic. "Picture a hospital with two or three people to a bed," says Lewis, "and, more often than not, someone under the bed on the concrete floor. In our system, every one of these would be in intensive care. There's one nurse for 80 to 90 beds. Aluminum coffins are wheeled in on a regular basis to take out the dead. And the pediatric wards" – here his voice catches – "are even worse." Infected mothers routinely pass on the virus to their unborn children, all for the want of a four-dollar pill that prevents transmission.

Lewis, haunted by the devastation, has been striving almost incessantly for change. He's reluctant to acknowledge how many hours he works. But when pressed he says, not with braggadocio but with some embarrassment, "Honestly? I work 17 to 19 hours a day." At seven days a week, that's the equivalent of three full-time jobs. He has no time for TV or movies and no hobbies whatsoever. "I understand there's a dimension of irrationality, perhaps instability, to what I do," he says with a self-deprecating smile. "I'm not pretending mine is an admirable existence."

Yet many consider it to be supremely admirable. Lewis gets standing ovations almost every time he speaks. In 2003 he received Canada's highest honour, a Companion of the Order of Canada, and was also named *Maclean's* first-ever Canadian of the Year. Last fall he ranked 17th on CBC-TV's list of 100 Greatest Canadians. People frequently tell him, much to his discomfiture, he's their hero. At a global AIDS awareness panel in London, British actress Emma Thompson gushed, "You are a god!"

Indeed, as an orator he's divine, speaking without notes, effortlessly moving his audiences to laughter and tears, the words flowing with such ease and grace and passion that he almost turns English into a romance language. But in person, Lewis is disarmingly human. He's a man who's shorter than his onstage presence would suggest, who's a three-time university dropout, who doesn't exercise (unless you count running for planes), who's as impulsive as he is intense, whose wife is a breast cancer survivor and whose daughter is a

lesbian single mother. And the continent he's so desperate to save is the same continent that once threw him in jail. After all, the local authorities thought, what white guy in his right mind would be travelling across the vast Sudanese wilderness unless he was a spy?

Perhaps the entire Lewis clan has been destined for illustrious and very public careers. Stephen's father was David Lewis, national secretary for the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and chief architect of its successor, the New Democratic Party (NDP). Stephen's wife, Michele Landsberg, is a writer who, over 25 years with the *Toronto Star*, became Canada's best-read columnist. Their son is Avi Lewis, former host of CBC-TV's "counterSpin" and CityTV's "The New Music" and now a documentary filmmaker. Avi's spouse and fellow filmmaker is Naomi Klein, activist and author of the international bestseller *No Logo*. Stephen's elder daughter is Ilana Landsberg-Lewis, a U.N. human rights lawyer until she moved back to Toronto to help her father run the foundation. His younger daughter is Jenny Lewis, casting director for prominent Canadian films such as *Ararat*.

But the Lewis family's origins are remarkably humble. Stephen's grandparents, Maishe and Rose Losz, grew up in the tiny Russian-Jewish community of Svisloch. The village was continually being invaded – first by the Russian army, then by the German army, then by the Bolsheviks. At one point the family, including six-year-old David, survived by hiding out for days in a cellar.

The Losz family changed their named to Lewis and immigrated to Montreal, settling in The Main, the poor immigrant neighbourhood made famous in Mordecai Richler's novels. While Maishe operated a sandwich concession stand, David taught himself English, going on to win a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford and finish a law degree. On his return to Canada, he chose to forgo law in favour of spreading social democracy across the country. He often left his whip-smart but desperately lonely wife, Sophie, to raise their four children alone in an upstairs flat in Ottawa.

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It was clear from early on that Stephen, the eldest child, possessed a natural eloquence, often giving little speeches for family and friends. He also had a precocious sensitivity. According to a letter his mother wrote to his father, one day Stephen said, "I don't know why I feel so shy suddenly. My heart seems to be jumping around inside of me. Perhaps I could just sit down in this chair, and we could have a dish-cushion." He was six.

When the family moved to Toronto, Stephen's skills as an orator were unmatched. In high school he gave speeches on world hunger. He won a debating contest whose prize was a trip to the U.N. He was elected president of the student council without ever having served in a lesser position, which caused his detractors to call him pretentious.

He provoked other labels, too. "We called him Jesus," laughs Alan Borovoy, who worked with Lewis as counsellor at a Jewish summer camp near Huntsville, Ont. "It was partly because

of his physical appearance – in the middle of summer he looked emaciated and wan, while the rest of us were tanned and fit. But also, we used to kid him that he had a martyr's complex. He was so driven that he didn't think he was doing a good job unless he stayed up half the night and made himself sick." Borovoy, general counsel for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, recalls that instead of organizing the usual camp games, Lewis always planned something wildly ambitious such as a re-enactment of the Hungarian Revolution, with campers divided into workers, peasants and students – and someone parachuting out of a plane.

While still in his teens, Lewis became involved in CCF campaigns, often taking his younger brother and twin sisters with him. He had big, outrageous, dramatic ideas to promote candidates. During a campaign to elect Andrew Brewin, he spray-painted 'Vote Andrew Brewin CCF' all over the roads in fluorescent green. The cops went nuts.

Lewis enjoyed the University of Toronto, but his horror of exams forced him to repeat second year, then to drop out in fourth year. He tried two different law schools but dropped out both times. "I have no degrees," he says. "I was a lousy student." (He has, however, received 20 honorary degrees – and counting.)

Moving to London, England, to work as a researcher for an organization called Socialist International, Lewis talked his way into representing Canada at a World Assembly of Youth in Ghana. Intending to stay in Africa a week, he stayed two years. He was captivated by the people, the music, the laughter, the energy, the community spirit. He taught school in Ghana, then became principal of a small high school in Nigeria. While travelling through Sudan, he was jailed as a suspected British spy. "It was only for a few days," he says with a shrug. "They brought me a Coke, so I figured they probably weren't planning to kill me."

Lewis would have stayed in Africa if not for Tommy Douglas, head of the newly formed NDP, who persuaded him to return to Canada to help build the party. Michele Landsberg, a volunteer canvasser, wasn't thrilled at the prospect of going to Lewis's pep talk. "I thought he must be pretty square," she remembers. "But he was so vibrant, so galvanizing, and wow! I was simply stunned."

Lewis was equally attracted to the dark, petite, vivacious Landsberg. On their first date, which she recalls included a fair amount of "necking," he asked her to marry him. "I laughed with astonishment and said, 'You must be crazy,'" says Landsberg.

A few weeks later, at his nomination convention, Lewis, outrageously impulsive, blindsided her by making a public announcement about their engagement – without having obtained her consent first. Somehow, the budding feminist, who was anti-marriage on principle, didn't argue – "You can't fight against life forces," she says – and they were married shortly afterward. When they moved in together and unpacked their clothes, there was still African sand in the cuffs of his trousers.

Elected to the Ontario legislature at the age of 25, Lewis, dubbed The Boy Wonder, was beginning to follow the pattern set by his own workaholic father. When the children started arriving – first Ilana, then Avi and Jenny – he was away much more than he was home. But Landsberg says, "David had been an absentee father, which was very painful to Stephen. Stephen took great pains *not* to be like that." He took the kids on campaigns with him. They loved it, but media criticized him for allegedly exploiting his children for political gain.

Their youngest daughter, Jenny, says that during his absences, his family was never far from his mind. After one trip to New Zealand and Japan, he brought her about 50 soap boxes

from hotels. When she thanked him for the soap, he said, “Did you open them?” In the first one, she found not soap but a pair of earrings. The second box revealed a ring. Each box contained a different tiny gift. “It must have taken him hours,” Jenny says. “Such a busy man with so many commitments – it was totally lovely.”

No matter how hectic life got, Lewis kept his outrageous sense of humour. One day when his normally punctual daughter Ilana was late for high school, she asked her father to write her an excusatory note. Lewis happily obliged. “Dear Teacher,” he wrote, “Ilana is late for school due to parental neglect and inclement weather.” Ilana was mortified, but the teacher burst out laughing.

HE LEFT EVERY JOB – POLITICS, HIS AMBASSADOR ROLE AND HIS UNICEF POSITION – BEFORE BECOMING ELIGIBLE FOR A PENSION

Still, when it comes to his work, Lewis couldn’t be more serious. His sister, Janet Solberg, who helps him research his speeches, says that to help him prepare for a speech to a national child-care conference last year in Winnipeg, she sent him 916 pages of background material. “He read all 916 pages,” Solberg says, “including all the appendices and tables.”

Lewis never stayed in a job for the money. He left every job – politics, his ambassadorial role and his UNICEF position – just before being eligible for a pension. In every job, he has always held absolutely rigidly to his belief in social justice and equality and his sharp sense of right and wrong. When Landsberg and Lewis were struggling financially, the owner of a ski resort offered the young MPP and his family an honorary membership. Landsberg says, “I was just about to say, ‘That’s great!’ but Stephen said under no circumstances would we be able to accept. His integrity is absolutely unwavering.”

Likewise, there’s little difference between his public and private lives. He had always argued publicly for gay rights; when his daughter Ilana came out to her parents as a lesbian at age 25, he was unfailingly supportive. Ilana says, “He was downright jocular about the whole thing. He said, ‘Oh, thank God! I was afraid you were going to marry one of those guys you were going out with!’” Ilana is now the single mother of two young boys, three-year-old Zev and infant Yoav, by sperm donor. Lewis jokingly refers to the father of his grandchildren as “our sperm-in-law.” The whole gang – Lewis, Landsberg, kids, spouses and grandchildren – take an annual holiday together in Costa Rica, during which Lewis breaks occasionally from his laptop to sit by the pool or play with Zev on the beach.

Becoming a grandfather has been a revelation for Lewis. “It’s just the most wonderful and lovable thing in the world to watch your grandchildren grow,” he says. While he’s meticulous about the hundreds of files in his home office, he’ll let Zev wander in, shout, “My files!” and dump them all over the floor. Lewis smiles indulgently, then, after Zev leaves the room, quietly picks up the papers and refiles them.

Even Lewis’s grandchildren can’t keep him from his work. They may even serve to spur him on as they stand in stark contrast to the estimated 20 million children who will be

orphaned within the next five years unless the world moves to act. Ilana says, "I haven't seen my father so profoundly haunted and disturbed and broken up and outraged about anything as he is about this."

Other Canadians are becoming outraged, too, as Lewis's driven energy and compassion galvanize them into action. What he calls his "little foundation" has already raised an astonishing \$3 million. Much of the money has arrived as small gifts from individuals: a B.C. woman donating the proceeds of sales of her \$3 knitted dishcloths; a Nunavut man contributing profits from a concert of local performers; a Montreal girl donating her bar mitzvah money. Most donations arrive with personal letters, such as that from Toronto fifth-grader Kirin Tsang, who sent his savings and wrote: "I have so many free things like school, shelter, good food, lots of things that I want. It isn't fair that other kids don't have these things. Kids needs to know that things will be okay."

The foundation pays for the most basic necessities of life and death. A bar of soap. A towel. A blanket. A burial. It also supports local initiatives, such as a building for orphan care in Uganda, home-based palliative care in Kenya, a school for orphaned teenage girls in Zambia and a support group for grandmothers raising grandchildren in South Africa.

And Lewis shows no signs of slowing down. While many feel defeated by the seemingly unstoppable force of the pandemic, Lewis, buoyed by the overwhelming response of Canadians, is actually feeling the stirrings of optimism. He believes that AIDS in Africa will one day be considered a chronic disease, as is gradually happening in Canada, and not a death sentence.

"I believe that in the second half of this year, the breakthrough will come – not a subduing of the pandemic, which will take years, but a momentum around treatment that will unleash a tremendous reservoir of hope," he says. "I am consumed by the need to keep at it because it speaks to keeping people alive. It's as simple as that."

And he's off to catch a plane. He doesn't want to keep 25 million people waiting.
