

# **a small act**

A Film by Jennifer Arnold

Press Contact:

**Jennifer Arnold**

**HARAMBEE MEDIA**

**+1 310 849 3866**

**[beaproductions@earthlink.net](mailto:beaproductions@earthlink.net)**

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A TEACHER'S GENEROSITY LEADS TO A LIFE-CHANGING PROGRAM  
ACROSS THE GLOBE IN THE DOCUMENTARY **A SMALL ACT**

How many times have you handed spare change to a total stranger? Or donated something toward a cause thousands of miles away? We never know which of our small actions make an impact. But what if one small act can change a life? What if that person goes on to change another life?

An official selection at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival, the feature documentary *A SMALL ACT*, tells the story of one such person, CHRIS MBURU, a young man from Kenya. His astonishing journey, from an impoverished village boy to an international human rights lawyer, challenges the typical portrayals of Africans on screen. Chris currently works for the UN, fighting discrimination and documenting genocide, but as a child, he was too poor to pay school fees. Chris finished school with the help of a Swedish benefactor named Hilde Back. She contributed the small amount of money required for his primary school, but she never knew the effect it had. Without education, Chris would most likely be picking coffee instead of fighting crimes against humanity.

Chris believes in the power of education. The young students in his village, like Chris before them, can't afford to move on to secondary school. Hoping to replicate the impact of the Swedish fund, Chris starts his own scholarship program, which aims to rescue bright, needy kids from a bleak future. He names the fund for his sponsor (the Hilde Back Education Fund) and meets her for the first time at the fund's dedication ceremony. It is here that he discovers Hilde is not Swedish, but a German Jew who escaped the Holocaust. She, in turn, never knew Chris grew up to fight genocide.

Today, the young students in Chris' village exemplify both Chris' past and Kenya's future. Kimani, Ruth and Caroline are the top three students in Mukubu primary school. Kimani, a smiling, high-spirited boy, sees education as the only way he will be able to get a good job and take care of his ailing mother. His academic rivals are the shy and quietly ambitious Ruth and her beautiful best friend Caroline. Both girls are mocked by friends and relatives because they can't afford to pay for school. Secondary school costs roughly \$500 (USD) per year, but these kids and their families only earn \$1.50 (USD) per day. They each pin their hopes on winning one of Chris' scholarships. To qualify, they need a minimum score of 380 on their KCPE Exam, the exit exam for primary education.

As Chris prepares to accept applications, the students fervently throw themselves into their studies. They see two options for their futures. They could grow up to be like Chris, a success story giving back to his community, or they'll live the lives of their parents, who are extremely intelligent but stuck in a cycle of poverty. When exam results are announced, none of the kids achieve 380. Their futures seem doomed. Chris is shocked when he hears only two students from the area's public schools have qualified. Kenya's future is looking uncertain. Then during Kenya's Presidential election, things get much worse.

In the midst of 2008's scholarship selections, Kenya unexpectedly plunges into ethnic-based, electoral violence. As a UN worker, Chris has dealt with conflicts in neighboring countries. He knows that ignorance fuels ethnic hatred. Education has never been more important. Chris' fund has money to sponsor ten new beneficiaries, but only two have qualified. Chris must now decide what to do.

Ultimately, he decides to bend the requirements for his fund, putting Kimani, Ruth and Caroline back in the running. Though his program is small, he hopes it will have an impact. Just as Hilde empowered him to make a difference in the world, he wants his new beneficiaries to grow up and do the same. He believes each of us can be part of a bigger cycle.

A SMALL ACT explores an amazing story of gratitude. It demonstrates education's role in alleviating poverty and conflict and at its heart is the belief that no gesture is too small to actuate tremendous change. As the amazed Back says during the film, "If you do something good, it can spread in circles, like rings on the water." The film's director Jennifer Arnold adds "as individuals, we all have the power to change the world in some way," and this film inspires audiences to do their part.

During the ten days of the Sundance Film Festival, audience members donated \$90,000 dollars toward the fund in the film. Though unsolicited, people began handing cash and checks to the film's subjects and producers. Some offered twenty dollars others donated thousands. "When I arrived at the festival I hoped people would like the film, but I never dreamt audiences would directly change peoples lives." Says Arnold. In the months since its US festival premiere, thousands more has been donated and hundreds of students are being sponsored. Also from the exposure in the documentary, the fund has now partnered with the Bertha Foundation and will expand from a small village fund, to a nation-wide program. The story in this documentary continues to grow.

Harambee Media and HBO Documentary Films present A SMALL ACT. Written and directed by Jennifer Arnold; producers, Jennifer Arnold, Patti Lee and Jeffrey Soros; executive producer, Joan Huang; cinematographer, Patti Lee; editors, Carl Pfirman and Tyler Hubby; composer, Joel Goodman. For HBO: senior producer, Lisa Heller; executive producer, Sheila Nevins.

North American Airdate on HBO: July 12<sup>th</sup> 2010

Festival World Premiere: Sundance 2010

Festival International Premiere: Hot Docs 2010 – Top Ten Audience Favorite

Festival European Premiere: Edinburgh Film Festival 2010

## **A SMALL ACT DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

When we think of Africa, many of us imagine slums, genocide, refugees or victims of HIV. There are, of course, major crises on the continent and many important films about the area's troubles. But, in reality, there is also huge potential, which is not represented in the media. There is a tendency for filmmakers to focus on the disenfranchised. From a Kenyan viewpoint, this at least creates sympathy, but ultimately undermines progress – it fosters the impression that Africans aren't equipped to tackle their nations' issues.

I attended the University of Nairobi in the early nineties and made lifelong friendships with other university students. They're now middle class Kenyans who are not only interested in taking over the role of development in Africa; they have the funds and expertise to put their plans into action. Much to my surprise, after graduation my friends began making more money per year than I did. I'm an independent filmmaker, so that might not be saying much. But why was I *surprised* by their success? After all, they have the same degrees as I do. They're equally intelligent and passionate about their careers. At the time however, my expectation was that challenges in Kenya would hold them back. I was wrong, but my attitude was endemic of a typical worldview.

There is an expectation that development must be brought into African nations from the outside and little recognition of the change already happening from within. This is largely due to the media. The images we produce are far reaching. It is important for film to promote dialogue between different groups. But for real growth to happen, people must view each other as equally capable partners in change. Documentaries need to present a more balanced view of African societies and incorporate pro-active, competent characters.

Chris Mburu is one such person. He is a contemporary Kenyan who bridges his country's past, present and future. He may have been born poor, but he's now a lawyer for the United Nations. He was once sponsored by a Westerner and is now a sponsor himself. Chris and his colleagues know how to transform the world around them. They embody empowerment and self-determination. Their voices are imperative to development, but they are nowhere on screen.

Chris believes the leading issue facing developing nations is not poverty, disease, ethnic or religious intolerance – he believes it is ignorance and lack of education. Without education, people are less likely to secure well-paying jobs, which could lift them out of poverty and enable them to give back to their society. Without education, a person is less likely to use a condom and protect him/herself from disease. And most importantly, a society without access to education is more ignorant, more desperate, and therefore, more susceptible to political manipulation along ethnic and religious lines. This can lead to violence

and conflict. Chris believes in the transformative power of education, because this is what changed his life.

The circumstances in Kenya may seem daunting from the outside. The quality of education has gone down. There is enormous disparity of wealth. In 2007, during the Presidential election, politicians used ethnicity in their campaign strategies, which sparked ethnic-based violence and divided the country down tribal lines. These are the exact types of situations Chris is trying to address. His plan is simple: support academically gifted kids from needy families. He considers his project an investment, which will grow exponentially. Because he was sponsored, he's now in the position to sponsor multiple students. He does so with the understanding that they will grow up to sponsor a bigger group. Chris' background gives him a unique perspective. When he encounters a child who is barefoot and destitute, he doesn't see a victim, but a solution.

When I heard the story of Chris' fund, I knew I could create something different. This film is an engaging narrative with huge stakes; the kids who compete for a scholarship are literally fighting for their lives. The relationship between Chris and Hilde is incredible and endearing. The inherent theme built into the story is that individual acts make a collective difference and the main character offers a concrete example of exactly what action we can take. But I'm not drawn to the story for its message. I am making this film because it exposes a part of Kenya, which I know well and should be properly represented. This documentary challenges viewers to examine their previous perceptions about Kenya. It broadens and subverts the typical portrayal of what is happening in Africa today, which will reshape the dialogue between all of us who are interested in change.

– Jennifer Arnold  
Director, Producer, Writer

## **A SMALL ACT BIOS**

### **Jennifer Arnold, Director/Producer/Writer**

Jennifer Arnold graduated from UCLA and University of Nairobi with a B.A. in African history and returned to UCLA for an M.F.A. in film. Her award-winning film, "Maid of Honor," screened at Sundance before airing on HBO/Cinemax and Film 4. Jennifer returned to Sundance with her internet series, "The Mullet Chronicles," which was developed into the documentary, "American Mullet," and released by Palm Pictures and Lions Gate. Jennifer also co-directed a documentary for Ethan Coen and wrote a motorcross script, "Speedway," which was selected for Berlin Talent Campus' script clinic, IFP's No Borders and FIND's Directors Lab / Fast Track Program.

### **Patti Lee, Producer/Director of Photography**

Patti Lee, a Los Angeles native, earned a Bachelors Degree at UCLA's Film School. She began her career in the Set Lighting Department on feature films, commercials and television shows with notable cinematographers Newton Thomas Sigel and Guillermo Navarro. Patti's Director of Photography credits include "Somebodies" (BET), "The Bernie Mac Show" (FOX), "Starting Under" (Warner Brothers) and Bunny, which was nominated for two Independent Spirit Awards. Patti has also shot several documentary projects, among them Sundance Channel's series "Big Ideas for a Small Planet" and "American Mullet."

### **Chris Mburu**

Chris Mburu is an international human rights lawyer from Kenya who is currently serving as Coordinator *ad interim* of the Anti-discrimination Unit with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland, focusing on anti-discrimination work. A graduate of University of Nairobi (LL.B) and Harvard Law School (LL.M), Mr Mburu has worked on human rights, governance, democracy, peace and conflict resolution issues for over 15 years and has served in many countries including USA, Democratic Republic of

Congo, Sierra Leone, Uganda, South Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Prior to his transfer to Geneva, he served as Advisor on Democracy for the UN Regional Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Yaoundé. He has previously worked with leading human rights organizations and policy think-tanks, including Global Rights, the International Crisis Group and Amnesty International.

**Jane Wanjiru Muigai**

Jane Wanjiru Muigai is a Harvard trained Kenyan lawyer, currently working as a Senior Legal Advisor with the Regional Bureau for Africa at the Headquarters of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Geneva Switzerland. She has served with the United Nations in various capacities for the past 10 years in various countries including, Switzerland, Ghana, Sudan, Somalia and Kosovo. Her professional experience prior to the UN spanned across borders – working first with various human rights and civil society organizations in Kenya and later with the American Civil Liberties Union in New York. Ms. Muigai trained at the University of Nairobi's law school, graduating with a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B) in 1994 and subsequently joined Harvard Law School where she graduated with a Masters in Law (LL.M) in 1996. Her support for public interest work goes beyond her professional career into various initiatives and has had membership of Amnesty International, Federation of Kenya Women Lawyers, International Commission of Jurists (Kenya Chapter) as well as being a volunteer Board Member with the Hilde Back Education Fund.

**A SMALL ACT  
CREDITS**

Director: Jennifer Arnold

Producers: Jennifer Arnold, Patti Lee, Jeffrey Soros

Executive Producer: Joan Huang

Director of Photography: Patti Lee

Editors: Carl Pfirman, Tyler Hubby

Music by: Joel Goodman

Supervising Sound Editor: John Leveque

Supervising Dialog Editor: Bernard Weiser

Sound Mixed by: Jonathan Wales

HBO Senior Producer: Lisa Heller

HBO Executive Producer: Sheila Nevins

**A SMALL ACT  
PHOTOS AVAILABLE FOR DOWNLOAD AT:**

[http://www.asmallact.com/press\\_photos/](http://www.asmallact.com/press_photos/)

**A SMALL ACT  
PRESS LINKS**

**New York Times:** Haiti Adds Resonance to Sundance Documentaries

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/23/movies/23sundance.html>

**New York Times:** Bill Gates, Sundance Celebrity

<http://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/24/bill-gates-sundance-celebrity/>

**Roger Ebert's Journal – Chicago Sun Times:** A Superwoman for Kenya, but America Still Waiting for Superman

[http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/01/a\\_superwoman\\_for\\_kenya\\_but\\_ame.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/01/a_superwoman_for_kenya_but_ame.html)

**Hollywood Reporter:** A Small Act – Film Review

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/film-reviews/a-small-act-film-review-1004063770.story>

**Reuters:** “A Small Act” Brings Big Gift at Sundance

<http://blogs.reuters.com/fanfare/2010/01/27/a-small-act-brings-big-gift-at-sundance/>

**Entertainment Weekly:** A Small Act documentary lures in monetary donations

<http://hollywoodinsider.ew.com/2010/01/25/sundance-a-small-act-documentary-lures-in-monetary-donations/>

**Row Three:** A Small Act – Film Review

<http://www.rowthree.com/2010/05/03/hot-docs-review-a-small-act/comment-page-1/#comment-44058>

**Canada National Post:** Lookout Gandhi Here Comes A Small Act

<http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/story.html?id=2995327>

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