

Scientist Makes Inroads With HIV/AIDS in Africa



Dr. Rolande Hodel in Cameroon

To the hiking enthusiasts who attempt the 3-mile-an-hour pace that Dr. Rolande Hodel maintains as leader of a Tuesday evening jaunt through Rockefeller Preserve in Pleasantville, this woman means business.

As seriously as she takes her commitment to lead the Meetup group with whom she faithfully exercises, the devotion to her life's mission is even more passionate and infinitely more far-reaching. While helping a few dozen 50-somethings keep in shape is a kind gesture, saving hundreds of lives a year is her real *raison d'être*.

Hodel is president and founder of AIDS-freeAFRICA, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping the people of Africa become more self-sufficient in producing essential, generic drugs to facilitate the access of African women infected with HIV/AIDS to the vital pharmaceuticals they need. Like a beautifully crafted musical composition, the German-born chemist/women's rights activist has been bringing all the right elements together to expand drug production in a small African nation since 2005.

Spending three months a year for the past 10 year in Cameroon (a sub-Saharan African country bordering Nigeria), Hodel has been intimately involved in consulting with start-up pharmaceutical companies in that "Africa in miniature" melting pot of a nation.

Facing physical and political dangers – her bout with malaria nearly took her out of the picture for a while – she tirelessly works, not only to fundraise, build alliances and share techni-

cal expertise on the day-to-day operations of running AIDSfreeAFRICA, but also to consult with drug production and drug supply chain management, and to implement and supervise income-generating programs in Africa. She's not only saving lives, she's improving the nation's economy by establishing initiatives which have empowered the women of Cameroon.

In developing the project, Hodel opened her conversations with Cameroonian stakeholders by asking, "What is it you need? What is it you already have? What is it that's not working?" to pave the way for eventual self-sufficiency and to allow for open dialog.

"Then I came back to the United States to find all these things – the technology, the people – and we were successful in almost all areas," explained the award-winning scientist.

Her charity brainchild came to her while listening to former Brazilian President Lula da Silva, who spoke at the United Nations in 2003 about how his country had managed the AIDS crisis at the time.

Recently honored with Legacy of Service Award for her "Service to International" from The Rotary Club of Jersey City, N.J., and also nominated for the prestigious 2016 "21 Leaders for the 21st Century," this energetic pioneer has made major strides in expanding drug production and providing training for locals in Africa. Her work with the women of the area revealed the practices by which they were conducting business, thus identifying the weak points of the

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existing system: high transport costs to get the products to the market, low profit margin items, and too many women selling the same kind of goods.

So, Hodel adopted the "U.S. thrift store concept" of bringing donated items from the states that are in high demand in Camaroon. The women pay a token fee to AIDSfreeAFRICA for the goods to cover the high ocean shipping costs, and then sell them to their villages with a good and sustainable profit margin. Much of this work is under the radar, as the law in Camaroon allows a husband to oppose his wife's right to work in a separate profession.

Hodel has also "adopted" three African girls who still live with their families, but are thriving and gaining access to health care and education due to the good doctor's support.

She is also a role model to young women in the U.S., where she teaches chemistry as an adjunct professor at Westchester Community College.

While the brisk hikes at Rockefeller are provided free of charge, Hodel accepts a dollar or two here and there for her leadership, which she immediately puts into her charity.

"Giving things for free is not really a good option," she said of the time and talent she gives the developing African nation. "It makes people dependent, and it creates the opposite of dignity... Even if I just bring a 50-pound box with medical supplies, I say 'I'm going to bring you this box, but you're going to feed me and host me,' so there is something in return."

A small price for such a generous humanitarian.

The home office of AIDSfreeAFRICA is located in Ossining. To learn more about the organization, visit www.aidsfreeafrica.org. Hodel can be reached at 914-923-2073, or RRHodel@aol.com.

