

Heroes

Radio Power
Kristine Pearson offers Africa's needy children Lifelines—special radios to connect them with lifesaving information

Kristine Pearson stands under a large tree in a remote Rwandan village, patiently showing a circle of wide-eyed teens how to operate large cobalt-blue radios. "Push this button," she tells the children, orphaned like 100,000 of their peers by ethnic cleansing a decade ago (see box) or by disease and now heading households themselves. "Go!" Suddenly two dozen radios explode with the sound of music. Smiles break out all around. "I'm not Mother Teresa," Pearson says later. "But I have this tool, and I can make a difference with it."

In fact, her radios have already improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of impoverished, largely illiterate children across Africa. Charged either by solar power or by a hand crank, the Crayola-bright devices can provide isolated orphans with schooling, news or potentially lifesaving advice on avoiding disease. Since receiving his Lifeline radio last year, "I have learned about AIDS and how I can stop from getting malaria by using mosquito netting," says Jonthan Macumi, 13, who lost his parents and seven of his 10 siblings to what he calls "illness." So valuable are the radios—produced by the Freeplay Energy Group, the technology firm run by Pearson's husband, South African entrepreneur Rory Stear—that chil-



"I see myself as an African-American because, for me, Africa is not a color," says Kristine Pearson (above, in Rwanda last month with some of the orphans who received Lifeline radios from the foundation she runs). In an '02 bonfire in Niger (right), Pearson destroyed the weapons she had received in exchange for her radios.



Angels



"Now I don't feel so isolated," says orphan Jonthan Macumi (in Rwanda last month).

“The radio can change the world one life, one house, one village at a time**”**

they weren't listening so that they wouldn't get used up. "I realized that although there was all this good programming for women and children," she says, "it wasn't reaching them."

That became Pearson's mission. As the foundation's executive director she does everything from courting corporate contributions—in 2002 Vodafone passed Freeplay Energy to rank as the charity's biggest donor—to redesigning the radios. (For a new model introduced last year she created a removable wire antenna, because she'd found that children often broke off the old ones to use for goatherding.) And while some in the international relief community question Pearson's practice of spending foundation funds to purchase the radios from her husband's firm, she has won the support of key philanthropists such as former President Jimmy Carter. "She's what I'd describe as a charming, good-looking bulldozer who simply doesn't take no for an answer," says *Sesame Street* chairman Vincent Mai. "Which is good, because her intent is incredibly noble."

Ultimately, says Pearson, what matters most to her is the feedback she gets from people like 14-year-old Rwandan orphan Mukakrimba, who received her Lifeline last year. "For a long time the most important thing I had was my goat," the teen said recently. "But now it is my radio."

By Pam Lambert, Dietlind Lerner in Rwanda

Do you know someone working to make a difference in the world? Send suggestions to heroesamongus@peoplemag.com. Please include your name, phone number and return email address.

RWANDA: 10 YEARS AFTER THE GENOCIDE

The children of Rwanda, says Kristine Pearson, "have gone through unspeakable horror. Sometimes just a kind voice that they can trust on the radio can make all the difference." Just 10 years ago their plight could not have been more desperate. In April 1994 the fields ran red as Hutu death squads began slaughtering their ethnic rivals, the minority Tutsis. By the time the "troubles" stopped 100 days later, nearly 100,000 children were orphaned. Today, thanks to foreign aid and investment by returning Rwandans, the economy is growing and "there has been some progress," says Richard Uku of the World Bank. But Rwanda "remains scarred by events that so brought the country to its knees." And the effects of the genocide will be felt for generations to come. "You can't possibly go to Rwanda," says Pearson, "and walk away from the images of those children and their suffering."