

Meet Two Women Who W

Maggy & Mona



Mona is European and Maggy, African. Their lives are devoted to rebuilding others'—from women living on the streets in France to female soldiers and children left orphaned by the war in Burundi. Their life paths draw on deep wells of humanism and generosity.



Since 1993, Maggy Barankitsé, a teacher in Burundi, has devoted herself to helping children and young adults victimized by a 10-year war that raged between Tutsis and Hutus. The war ended in 2003 but left many lives in need of rebuilding, including those of orphans and demobilized child and female soldiers.

Mona Chasserio began meeting women living on the streets in France 16 years ago, in an effort to understand their suffering. That experience led her to create the organization, Cœur de Femmes. Born in 1946 into a matriarchy (Mona has five sisters), she was raised “to respect feminine values, the harmony of our daily actions and shared lives.” In 1988, she had a mystical experience. A meeting with Abbé Pierre, founder of France’s Emmaüs movement, which helps the poor, the homeless and refugees, opened her eyes to the streets and the plight of women there. Another meeting, this one with Mother Marie-Thérèse of Le Carmel de la Paix, led her to take action. She decided to leave her job in the pharmaceutical industry, distance herself from her familiar world and enter a different one. “We address problems of social exclusion without considering the differences between men and women,” she says.

“But everything in that parallel world - space, time, distance is different. Faced with these lives spent wandering and in suffering, destroyed alcohol and drugs, I asked myself, ‘What about the children they will bring into the world? These women will be creating new lives and transmitting values.’ They have been beaten and sometimes, raped. They have been imprisoned and are far from home. Some were tortured in countries at war. They are fragile shadows without structure to their lives. Mona decided to live with them on the street. By day, she would knock on the door of government ministry offices. In 1993, she opened her first site, which continues to grow.

Recovering Dignity

In October of that same year, Burundi plunged into civil war. In Ruyigi, Tutsis appeared at the archdiocese where a group of Hutus had taken refuge. Maggy, a Tutsi, tried, unsuccessfully, to step between them. Seventy-two men, women and children were killed in front of her. She managed to save 25 children. Within a few years, the number grew to hundreds

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and has since reached thousands. The children came to live at Shalom House, a name they borrowed from a peace song they heard on the radio.

Maggy's goal is to help them to "recover their dignity, take advantage of the opportunity to learn about peace, participate in an apprenticeship and take the first step toward becoming productive members of society." She explains that Shalom House is "more of a jumping-off place or a gateway than an institution. The goal is to help to restore these children to their families so that they can fight standing tall. They will need long-term support and must begin to take responsibility." In some cases, it has taken more than 10 years to return children to their families. When family restoration proves impossible, the organization builds houses (more than 500 to date) that belong to them "so that they can rebuild sibling relationships and the older ones can help the younger ones," she says. "Simultaneously, we offer them an opportunity to earn money through Shalom House." With 660,000 orphans, the needs are immense. Since the ceasefire, Maggy has also been caring for former child soldiers and, since 2005, for former women soldiers. "How can we restore these children to their families without helping their mothers?" she asks. After years of fighting and living in the bush, they are social outcasts. Some have been rejected because they returned with children born in the bush. The goal is to "allow them to be-

come independent again, to transmit that sense of independence to their children and, thus, to allow them to participate in community life." Maggy transmits her values, too: the dignity of each human being, non-violence, sharing and ethnic non-discrimination. In a word, peace. To achieve that, "her" children have invented a new term. , "We are Hutsitwacongos," they say, referring to the three ethnic groups (Hutu, Tutsi and Twa).

Learning to Live Again

Thanks to Mona, Cœur de Femmes and its 130 employees display a similar spirit. They reach out to the most disadvantaged in an effort to understand them and teach them to live again. "You have to establish contact and dialogue," Mona explains. "It involves seeing, listening, feeling and sensing that goes beyond words. That is what is required if we are to help women grasp the crux of their suffering and break through the mechanism that leads to this destruction. It's amazing to see them come to life again and assert themselves." This is a rebuilding process that requires finding an answer to the question, "How can we reintegrate these human beings into society when they can no longer hold on?" The Cœur de Femmes house and the group's other sites thus become oases where every person has a voice. There, residents gradually regain their footing by relearning the simple actions of daily life from sleeping in a bed to preparing meals together and eating at the same table. Workshops (drawing, writing, horseback riding, theater, dance, etc.) are therapeutic tools for, as Mona says, "reaching the unconscious and touching what it is that prevents them from living." That way, they rediscover all the human qualities that characterize each one of them.

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**Rebuilding lives
by taking the time
to talk, in a safe,
gentle and
encouraging
environment.**





The Shalom House

Maggy created other centers after setting up the Shalom House. By returning children to their families, building houses and creating revenue-generating activities, she has helped more than 10,000 Burundian children, as well as those from Rwanda and the Great Lakes region. The Veolia Foundation made a € 90,000 grant to support Maggy's latest project, which works to reintegrate women soldiers into society. Dominique Boizeau, who works for the Foundation, is the project sponsor. Maggy expects that in three years, some 100 women will have returned to civilian life and to work. This project includes building homes, where they will learn to live peacefully with their children.

Reading list: "La haine n'aura pas le dernier mot," by Christel Martin, Albin Michel.



Cœur de Femmes

Through the Cœur de Femmes sites, nearly 600 people have moved off the streets and redirected their lives. In Paris, activities are organized around three programs: two day centers, one for men and one for women; a team known as, La Maraude that works with street people; and, La Maison, where women live and begin to restore their lives. In the Île-de-France region, the La Péniche, a barge moored near Paris, offers women a place where they can create stability in their lives and work as "apprentices" in independent living. Finally, women in the Loire-Atlantique region of France are implementing an innovative environmental project through La Maison de Guérande.

Through the project's sponsor, Géraldine Fort, in Veolia Environnement's Communications Department, the Veolia Foundation made a € 25,000 grant to Cœur de Femmes.

Reading list: Mona Chasserio, "Cœur de Femmes," Louis Audibert, 2005