

UCSD Fundraiser To Benefit East Africans Orphaned By HIV/AIDS

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Sue Pondrom

A Sunday afternoon fundraiser to benefit East African children orphaned by the HIV/AIDS epidemic will be held 2-5 p.m. May 30 in the UCSD Price Center Ballroom on the UCSD campus in La Jolla.

For a \$5 donation, participants can enjoy cultural presentations, East African tea and coffee, a fashion show, and lectures by UCSD HIV/AIDS researchers Eliezer Masliah, M.D., and Dianne Langford, Ph.D. Tickets are available at the UCSD Box Office in the Price Center; from the event sponsor, Horn of Africa UCSD (hafrica@ucsd.edu or 510-332-9769); or from Langford at 858-822-3182.

Masliah and Langford are members of an organization called People to People (P2P) whose mission is to increase awareness about the HIV epidemic in Africa (see www.peoplepeople.org). Proceeds from the fundraiser will go to P2P, which will use the monies to help hundreds of children in Ethiopia who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS.

The two UCSD researchers became interested in the African epidemic when they heard a presentation by a soft-spoken Ethiopian physician at a neurovirology conference in late 2002.

"You could hear a pin drop during that presentation," Langford said. "Everyone was moved."

As a result, Langford and Masliah volunteered to travel to Ethiopia with P2P to see how they could help. During their trip, which took place last January, they interacted with hundreds of orphaned children and saw the circumstances in which they lived. The two also met with medical research counterparts at the University of Addis Ababa to set up a collaborative program to study the natural history of the HIV infection in Ethiopia. This information is important to know since the availability of anti-retroviral medication is very limited and drug-resistant virus has not yet developed in the Ethiopian population. Under the research agreement, African physicians will obtain tissue from patients and conduct preliminary studies. Tissue samples will also be sent to Masliah and Langford for more detailed analyses.

While in Ethiopia, the UCSD researchers also met with the country's health minister to support a program developed by P2P and Pfizer Pharmaceuticals for a donation of unlimited supply of the drug Fluconazole. This drug treats opportunistic fungal infections caused by HIV.

Commenting on the Ethiopian trip, Langford said "this experience changed my life. I realized I could be a voice for these children."

As a result, she worked with the Horn of Africa group at UCSD to present the May 30 fundraising event.

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