

Interview with Sister Mary Elizabeth Lloyd

The following is a verbatim transcript of an interview of the author (MEL) by Juanita Watson (JW), host of Inside Scoop Live.

JW: Hello, and welcome to Inside Scoop Live, a live audio program brought to you by ReaderViews.com. I'm your host Juanita Watson. I've invited on the program today, Sister Mary Elizabeth Lloyd, to talk about her inspired and inspiring new book, *AIDS Orphans Rising: What you should know and what you can do to help them succeed*. The website is AIDSOrphansRising.org. This amazing book sheds light on the desperate issue of child headed households, which are formed by the death of parents from AIDS, left behind to take care of themselves. These little children, often four or five of them, struggle desperately to stay together as a family. Sister Mary has been helping the orphans and the child headed households of the Missions of the Religious Teachers Filippini for the past 12 years.

Her experiences in Albania, Brazil, Ethiopia and India have spurred her on to produce her book, *AIDS Orphans Rising*, which takes readers through the daily lives of these forgotten children, and includes many ideas on how you can help them make it in this world. Sister Mary holds a doctorate in Nutrition and Public Health from Columbia University, and I'm just so happy to have Sister Mary on the phone today. Welcome to Inside Scoop Live, sister.

MEL: Thank you Juanita, and this is a great opportunity to get the word out about the children.

JW: Thank you so much for talking to us today. How did you first become aware of and involved with this issue of child headed households?

MEL: For years, we have had child headed households in Ethiopia, and mainly from war, but what we were finding is that more of the child headed households were from

the mother and father dying of AIDS, and we had to do something to help these children.

JW: So, was most of your work done in Ethiopia?

MEL: Most of our work is done in Ethiopia, Brazil, India, Albania, those five countries and Eritrea. Those 5 countries are the ones I'm responsible for, for our mission.

JW: How long have you been going over and doing all the traveling with this mission?

MEL: This is my 13th year. We're seeing progress, but the number of AIDS orphans are continuing to rise.

JW: They really are, and I know you have some staggering statistics regarding these children. Can you tell us a little bit about those?

MEL: Surely. The UN predicts that by 2010, there will be 25 million orphans from AIDS. But I just read a site today, May 7 2007, National AIDS Children's day, they predict 100 million. The numbers are incredible, of these orphans, and I can't tell you... that these children are walking around with no adult supervision, little food, little clothing, and if good people do not help them, the world will really be in a bad place.

JW: That's an amazing, amazing amount of children and there's something I read on your website, or somewhere, that every 14 seconds, a child-headed household is formed?

MEL: Yes, every 14 seconds there are little children where their mother and father have died from AIDS. Usually, the youngest child dies first. The youngest child will get AIDS. Then the mother dies and the father dies, and these little children, 3 or 4 of them or sometimes more, are left to fend for themselves.

JW: That's just incredible! Most of us cannot even comprehend...

MEL: Have you heard of this before?

JW: Well, not to this extent. I think that's just the case for a lot of people.

MEL: You see these concerts for the AIDS orphans, but somehow the message is not getting out.

JW: No. So why then? It's obvious, but tell us about your decision to write *AIDS Orphans Rising*, and what you were hoping to get across to readers, and to the general public, about this issue.

MEL: The situation is very bad, but I didn't want to make a sad book. I wanted to show that these children are rising. These are not just street kids who are sniffing glue. These are 4 or 5 children that had a mother and father and they had a house, they had a life, and all of a sudden it's gone. And now these 4 or 5 children want to stay together and they want to have a good life. Usually the oldest girl is the one who takes charge. We are trying to help them make it. We pay rent for some of them. Some of them have a house, so then we help them get food. We give them all an education. The very small ones, where the oldest child is maybe 8 and the youngest one is 3, we take them into the convent and help them until they can get on, on their own

JW: What has happened to property rights that were in the names of the mothers or fathers? Do the kids get the rights?

MEL: It's very sad. Often what happens is that the children's groups go together. The brothers and the sisters walk to town looking for help, and when they are gone, unscrupulous relatives take over—even if they only had a hut—the relatives literally take over the hut. When the children come back, they are chased away by the relatives.

JW: By the *relatives*???

MEL: By the relatives! Before, the relatives would take them in, but now there are so many orphans that the extended family members are so overtaxed, and the unscrupulous ones take everything away from these little children.

JW: That is amazing! Even the grandparents?

MEL: Some of the grandmothers are putting up with a tremendous burden. One of the grandmothers had 10 children. They all grew up and got married. And they all

had their own children. All of her 10 children have died from AIDS, and all of their spouses have died from AIDS. She has more than 50 grandchildren in her house. She comes every day for food and water for these children. It's just incredible. The grandmothers are going to be the ones to save Africa.

JW: That is incredible. So many of the children of the parents who have died, they are also carrying HIV virus?

MEL: There are thousands who have it, but there are many more who do not. These are the ones that the book is zeroing in on. You'd need a ten volume book if you were to cover all of the situations. But I tried to zero in on the children who do not have AIDS and who are trying to survive, and my hope is that perhaps everyone in your audience would be able to help them.

JW: Is it in Africa that the AIDS epidemic is most prevalent?

MEL: In most of the literature it is, but when you look closely, China doesn't record their numbers. India has just started to record their numbers.

This year alone, India will have 4 million orphans from AIDS. A number that is just astounding to us. 4 million of anything we cannot even comprehend. These are just children who will be alone, without anyone. A child who loses their mother and father from war can cry and tell every-one a story, but these children are ashamed. They know the story, they died from AIDS, but yet there are so many other children where their mother and father died from AIDS too, that nobody cares.

JW: Are there a lot of missionaries and mission work that is being done like the group that you are with?

MEL: We are doing a lot. There are many, many groups and in the books I cite many of them that are trying to help these children. The big problem is that a lot of the larger groups will give aid to the government, but not to small non-profit groups, and that is where we are having a problem, especially finding food for the children.

JW: So why is this epidemic reaching such a dire state at this point? Why do you think that the Western world isn't doing more to help these children?

MEL: The international community ignored the issue from 1991 to 1997. They were hoping that they would be able to stop the epidemic, so they didn't concentrate on the orphans. They didn't even report it because that's what they were hoping. So that is what caused the boom, and now it's out of control.

JW: What about the U.S.? What are you seeing being done as far as AIDS right now in the United States, and are people really willing to concern themselves with these issues that are basically going on on the other side of the planet?

MEL: Many Americans are. Most of the aid you see over there is from America. I love it when I walk through the villages. All of the bags—the girls are so clever, they cut open the bags when they do get grain, and the bags say “complements of the people of the United States of America.” And they'll make a little dress, and this is the front of their dress. It's a beautiful thing to see. Many Americans don't know about this, but the minute they know, they help. So that's why I am hoping that this book gets out and people will realize. You see Oprah and how hard she's trying to educate the girls, and that's what we are trying to do, educate these children so they can survive.

JW: So tell us more about this book, *AIDS Orphans Rising*. What kind of stories are you including? What can we expect from this book?

MEL: I'll tell you a couple of stories. One little boy, he came to us with his little brothers and sisters. He had no way of making a living. So we gave him a little house, and some food, and got him going, and gave him 6 eggs, and said “sell these, come back and we'll give you some money, and give you some more eggs.” So every day he'd sell those 6 eggs and come back. And it would grow. And as he got older... today he's got 500 chickens, he's got his own little house, he's got his own little market, and he's

doing fine. And he comes every day to give eggs to the sisters for the orphans that we're now trying to help. It's beautiful.

JW: That is just a beautiful story.

MEL: We have opened what we call a "pizza-gelato" initiative. A man from Italy built us two pizza ovens and we've bought an industrial gelato machine. And the oldest of the child-headed household gets the first chance at this, and she learns how to make pizza, how to make gelato, and it's really a 21 course program. When they're finished they have a certificate and they can either start their own stand, or go work in the city. They have a certificate that says that they do know how to do these things. They are getting work and they are able to provide for their brothers and sisters.

JW: So how many children go through this mission, and how long do they stay there?

MEL: Well, at each mission we have about 700 children, but for the older girls we have different initiatives going—let's say this pizza one—there are 21 girls who go through every 6 months. Each program is a little different. We have another school where they also learn poultry raising and bee cultivating, things like that. And when they graduate, we ask them "which course did you like best?" If they like the poultry raising they get 500 fertilized eggs, if they like sewing they get a sewing machine at graduation, things like that. We try to set them up in their own micro-enterprise.

JW: That's wonderful. Do they take that to their different communities? What happens after that?

MEL: Yes! Many of them stay within their own community, where we are, but many of them go on to another village there isn't whatever it is they are able to do, and that's why they are able to survive. Some girls learn how to make bread, so they'll go to a little village that doesn't have a bakery and they'll set up their own bakery, and they are able to carry on. These are 16 year old girls!

JW: Incredible! I have heard you use the words resilient and courageous, when you talk about these children. If you could talk a little more about what we can learn from the strength in this children.

MEL: These children don't want to give up. A lot of people say, "Aren't you sad when you are with these children?" No, you're not sad. These children want to make it. There's nothing sad about it. They want to go to school, they want to get an education. This impressed me the most. They want to go to school and they don't mind working, so most of them go to school full time and they work full time and they're 10 years old! It's just incredible! They have a smile on their face. They know that they can sit in a corner and cry, and there are some children who do that. But most of them get up and go, they want to make their life good.

JW: Where do you think that comes from? That they have that courage and that strength? It's really amazing!

MEL: It is amazing. I think a lot of it comes from their own families, their own mothers and fathers. They had good mothers and fathers, they just got the sickness and then they died. These children know they were living in a good family life before their families got broken up. They have strong faith too. In these countries, their religion is very strong. They believe in a God and they practice their religion. And I think that helps a lot too, because they have something to fall back on. They believe in a heaven. They believe that there is something better coming. They know that their mothers and fathers are up there waiting for them.

JW: So what about orphanages for these children? What are your thoughts on orphanages? What kinds of orphanages do you see in these counties? I'm sure there are good and bad ones, pros and cons to this issue of orphanages.

MEL: There's a great group called SOS Children's Villages, and they take on a lot of these AIDS orphans. They have a little village, it's not a highly structured orphanage

like in the old days, but the children do all the chores and they seem vey happy. The children in our orphanages are the same. They have many chores, they go to school, but it's more of a family atmosphere. But what I studied was that the children that went to orphanages, a higher percentage were happy they went to the orphanage, as opposed to many who had gone through foster homes and had problems with that. There are so many pros and cons with that. When the orphanages collapsed in America, that's when the welfare system began. There's a big debate on that also. But I think that all orphanages can be good, if they have good leaders, and the people who are with the children are loving them, that's the trick of it.

JW: So there are orphanages that are related to the mission that you're involved in?

MEL: Yes. We have—in India we call them hostels, we don't call them orphanages. In Ethiopia we call them homes. The kids are welcome. The sisters have designed a nice system: when the girls—we do mainly girls—because 75% of these orphans are girls, and they're not going to get an education if someone good doesn't help them, if someone good doesn't help them. So what we do, when they are 17 and 18, and finished high school, if they aren't ready to go out into the world, we have another section where they each get a little home, and they stay with their brothers and sisters. We call them apprentices. And they help with the newer orphans until they're ready to go out on their own or until they get married, or until they are able to get on with their own life.

JW: Amazing! So why are there more girls than boys?

MEL: I don't know. Before when I would go, I'd see a lot of little boys in these child-headed households. But I think the boys are running away now. And also, if you give extended family members a choice, they'll take a boy, because he can work harder. And they know that the boy will get a job quicker and will be able to pay them some money. Very sad situation that way.

JW: So many of these children you say are wanting education. What type of education are they predominantly looking for, and what are they going to need to succeed?

MEL: They are happy to have any kind of education. In our school, they get a regular elementary education then we'll send them on to High school. While they are getting their education, half of the day they will also learn a marketable skill, so that when they get out they'll be able to take care of themselves.

JW: Some kind of trade...

MEL: Yes. They also learn business skills, how to keep the books, things like that.

JW: Do you find that these children have some level of education already?

MEL: The ones that come from the villages, no. The girls have had nothing. First grade here in America, everybody is 6 or 7 years old. In our schools, you can be up to 20 years old and be in first grade. Some of these children and adults have never had education and they want it and they have to start. We have a program where we start them at first grade, but it's accelerated, they can pass on as quickly as they can, if they can. In many of these countries, if you don't have an 8th grade diploma, you can't get a license for a car, you can't buy property, there are many governmental restrictions without a diploma. In many of these countries, public school you pay, and Catholic school is free!

JW: Is that right?

MEL: It's the opposite here in America. We have so many in our schools, we pay for the overflow to go to public schools.

JW: Where is the money coming from, the funding, to do that?

MEL: That's really my job, I look for the funding. I write grants; good people find us and help us out.

JW: This book, *AIDS Orphans Rising*, 100% of the proceeds from this book are going to the mission?

MEL: Correct! In my research I was hoping to find other groups, but our group is the only group where 100% of your money, 100% of your dollar will get to the poor. That's a good question to ask when people ask you for money. What percentage of my money is getting to the poor? In some of these very large groups, only 3 cents of your dollar gets to the poor!

JW: Three cents!

MEL: Three cents. They had one of these telephone telethons? I called in and asked what percentage of this is going to get to the children? One cent of every dollar raised went to the children!

JW: That is not right!

MEL: It's not right! So you have to be very careful when people ask you for money. What percentage will get to the children? We're able to promise you that any money that we receive for the children gets to them, because we have other ways of getting money that will pay for the sister's trips, education and housing, we are supported in another way for that.

JW: Is there information and pictures and updates and that sort of thing on your website?

MEL: Yes, there is! It's a great website, should I say it? It's www.aidsorphansrising.org. And that also has the mailing address if any-one would like to send us a donation. It has pictures, it leads you to other sites. And on Amazon, besides purchasing the book, they also sell it as an eBook.

JW: Great!

MEL: You can download it to your Kindle or whatever device you might have to read it. You can also click and go to the sites that I've put in the book, so if someone is working on adoptions and they want to go, I have a couple hundred sites in the book and you can just click it and go to that site right away.

JW: That's fantastic! Now you just mentioned adoption, and I'd like you to talk a little about that. Tell us about the potential for adoption with these children: if it's hap-

pening, if the kids want it. You also talk about virtual adoption, which I believe is what most people understand as sponsoring a child?

MEL: Yes, that's right. What is happening is that most of these countries don't want their children to be adopted, because they are afraid of losing their future leaders, and it's true, because when you adopt a child, when you look at the children you pick the brightest one! And these children are clever, I've watched them. They know that people who want to adopt them are coming, so the whole little group, they're little politicians, they get out there showing you how good they are, how smart they are.

So a lot of countries, especially Guatemala for instance, will not allow any Americans to adopt any of their children, they've put the clamp down on that. Right now you have a good chance of getting Ethiopian children, but even there the window of opportunity is closing. These countries do not want to lose their children and you can't blame them, but yet they have to provide for their children which they haven't started to do yet. They have lots to do ahead of them.

About the virtual adoption—virtual adoption where people pay money per month to adopt a child. You have to be really, really careful on this, because I've seen places where they send the same picture to five people. If you're sending \$100, for \$10 I can buy 400 rolls for the children—the exchange rate is really good, sometimes it's more than ten times the money that you send. Be careful when you are doing these adoptions from a distance. I'd say adopt the whole class, because with \$100 you can feed a whole class of children.

JW: Are there any warning signs you have for people who are researching different resources, to make sure they are on the up and up?

MEL: Yes, it's in the book. Just keep clicking the sites, and you'll be able to find out which ones are good and which ones are not. After you've seen 3 or 4 you get the feeling right away, you're able to read what's happening

and how much. Also, all of them have a contacts page, you can write and ask them specific questions.

JW: I think that an amazing aspect of this book is the number of resources that you include.

MEL: I tried to put as many as I could because I know we are not knowledgeable on this topic at all. I thought it would even be good for schools of public health to use this book, or anyone teaching about this.

JW: I want to back up just a little bit to the adoption issue. We're seeing a lot on TV and from different sources talking about adoption, and people are adopting a lot of children from Africa, but you're saying that this may not be happening to much in the future. Are there any countries outside of Africa that are welcoming adoption by the U.S.?

MEL: Yes, In China you can still get children, in India you can still get children. The trick is to find the group that will allow you to do it. You have to be patient. What I've seen so many times, people are trying to adopt and they'll get rejected one, two, three times. Then they'll get a beautiful child. It's almost like, this is the child God wanted them to have. So don't give up, keep working at it. Keep networking with other people. That's the beauty of the internet. If you are looking for a child you go on the internet and say, I'm trying to adopt, and you'll get a thousand friends all of a sudden and they'll help you—people will have adopted already.

JW: With the donations that you get, how do you decide how much money goes where? I'd like to know more about this. You've got a food program, a hot lunch program, tell us more about that.

MEL: In America, what ended hunger was the hot school lunch program...

JW: That's fascinating, you have to tell us more about that, I've never heard that before.

MEL: Yes, in the early 1900s, the children in America—In my book I give the quote, in Brooklyn and New York, the kids were starving, and what they did was put in the

hot lunch program and that ended hunger in America. So what I'm trying to do is put a hot lunch program in all of our missions there. What I hope to do—we have home economics schools at each of our missions. I'm hoping that the women will be the ones to cook the lunches, and they can also sell it to people in town, so that the money they make will help to pay for the children, because the initial setup is very expensive, very costly.

JW: So basically, for the money that you're raising, food and education are your two priorities?

MEL: Yes, food and education. And housing! We have to house them. In Ethiopia, the children that can't fit into the convent, we pay 3 dollars per month and they get a cement tent—like a cement box—you've seen these things on the highway—tent sheds or something—they look exactly like that. That's what the poor kids have, but they're happy. They get their box for 3 dollars a month. The sister goes around in the morning, wakes them all up, brings them to school, they get their breakfast, a little something to start their day. At night they go home. We pay a woman to almost be like a guard for them at night so that they are safe.

JW: That's another issue too. How safe are these areas that you are in?

MEL: It varies by country. Right now in Ethiopia most of the men are in the army because Eritrea, the little country above it, wants to go to war and most of their men are in the army. So throughout these little villages there are very few men around, so in those cases it's very safe. In some other countries it's a little more risky. In Brazil we're having a very difficult time because they're stealing children for their organs.

JW: So many layers to this issue.

MEL: That's really true. And those kids have nobody to fight for them. An-other thing—whenever they write these rights for the children, they never ask for the kids' opinion—they are always written by adults.

JW: Are you hopeful when you look to the future, for these children?

MEL: Yes, for the ones we're working with, I'm very hopeful. But for the ones who aren't getting help, they are the ones we have to reach out to. We are a small institute. We are only 800 in the world. And you have 4 million children in India alone, who are orphans. Somebody else has to get out there and help them! So I'd encourage everyone to help. Often people say, "Well I can't do anything!"

But whatever talent you have, you can do something. I have a great friend, he's a mountain climber. Last year he said, "Sister, you said Saint Lucy wanted to be in every corner of the world. Well, how about Mount Everest?" And I said fine. So he climbed Mount Everest and he got sponsors, and we used the money. He actually brought the money himself to Eritrea to allow us to build a little hospital for the children.

Another girl friend of mine is a runner. She runs 300 or 400 miles at a time. She gets sponsors. She has helped us for many years. People who like to sew, look at your old sewing machine, it's just sitting there. Mail it in! It will change a girl's life, an old sewing machine. Old plumbers—if I had 50 retired plumbers we could change the world. Anything you can do, the world can use it. So I say put your mind to work and see how you can help these children.

JW: I love that! Do you have on your website or in your books, do you have a list of those kinds of ideas? Because I don't necessarily think that most people's mind go to that!

MEL: Every chapter in the book has something like that—what you can do.

Oh, good!

MEL: Even people who are good on the internet—I have a great friend, Julianne Coleman and she was a grant writing teacher. I said, well, teach me how to write grants, that's how you can help these children. And she has been helping me tremendously. People who have money but

say, well I'm afraid to give to this person, afraid to give to that person, start your own family foundation, then you decide who gets your money. It's very effective to have your own foundation, and it's very easy to set up.

JW: I think most people just get overwhelmed when they think of that. They make a donation and then they worry about if the money is... If it got there.

MEL: Yes.

JW: Seeing all of this, how do you keep yourself positive. I can imagine some of these places could become so overwhelming.

MEL: When you are with the children, they're smiling, they want to make it, it keeps you going, it really does. What hurts me is when I come home and look at the pictures. I see these kids and I think ...I could have done this, I could have done that. Then you go back and you do more. They want to live so you can help them. That's the nice thing. They've always got a smile. They are ready to go.

JW: They inspire you?

MEL: They do. They want to live.

JW: Our time is coming to an end, sister. I'm just so happy to have had you on the program today and I thank you so much. I just want to offer this final time, your last thoughts that you want to include today.

MEL: Thanks you Juanita for this. Don't think of this as a sad story, this is great! We can help these children succeed. And they are Africa's last great hope. If we can help them, Africa will be a great nation.

JW: Thank you so much sister. It's been a great pleasure talking to you. Best of luck to your mission. I hope that everybody listening to this interview today decides to help in some way.

MEL: Thank you very much, and God bless you for all the good you do.

JW: Thank you, and you too. All right, there you go listeners. This has been Sister Mary Elizabeth Lloyd and her