

Changing lives with music



City man aims to rehabilitate child soldiers from Congo / A5

WINNIPEG FREE PRESS, MONDAY, JUNE 13, 2011 A5

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Quest to reform child soldiers

Musician heading to Congo to help

By Carol Sanders

THEY say music has charms to soothe the savage breast, but can it change a child who was raised to kill?

Winnipeg's Darcy Ataman is going to the Democratic Republic of Congo where child soldiers are being rehabilitated to find a way to help.

Changing abnormal behaviour isn't easy, but the music producer's learned the dream of having a song on the radio can transcend everything, everywhere.

"Everyone wants to be a rock star," said the 36 year old who founded the organization Song for Africa and leaves on his seventh trip to the continent June 20.

Ataman, who's working with the University of Winnipeg's Global College, is going to Congo with a researcher from Sen. Romeo Dallaire's Child Soldiers Initiative that's trying to put a stop to the use of kids for killing.

For the child soldier, leaving that kind of life isn't easy and going home is harder, said Ataman.

"There's a lot of stigma and shame. If you're a male, you've maybe had to kill a member of your own family... If you're a female, there's the double issue," he said. Girls are used as fighters' sex slaves, and raped. If they have kids as a result, there's a stigma attached to them and their children.

His organization came up with programming to work with kids in Rwanda

writing and recording their songs about HIV/AIDS.

"What we learned is all these taboo subjects they could talk about in music," he said.

"This trip is about how to model it for Congo," said Ataman, whose expenses will be covered by a private donor.

Recording a song builds a kid's self esteem and is the best way to get a message out, peer to peer, he said.

In Congo later this month, they're visiting a transit centre for young soldiers who are dropped off or escape, a UN centre where the soldiers are rehabilitated and a hospital. The Global College is preparing a questionnaire for the kids to get an idea of how to come up with a program to take back there.

They'll be meeting second-generation child soldiers — the kids of kids recruited to fight, he said.

"That's how they were raised," said Ataman.

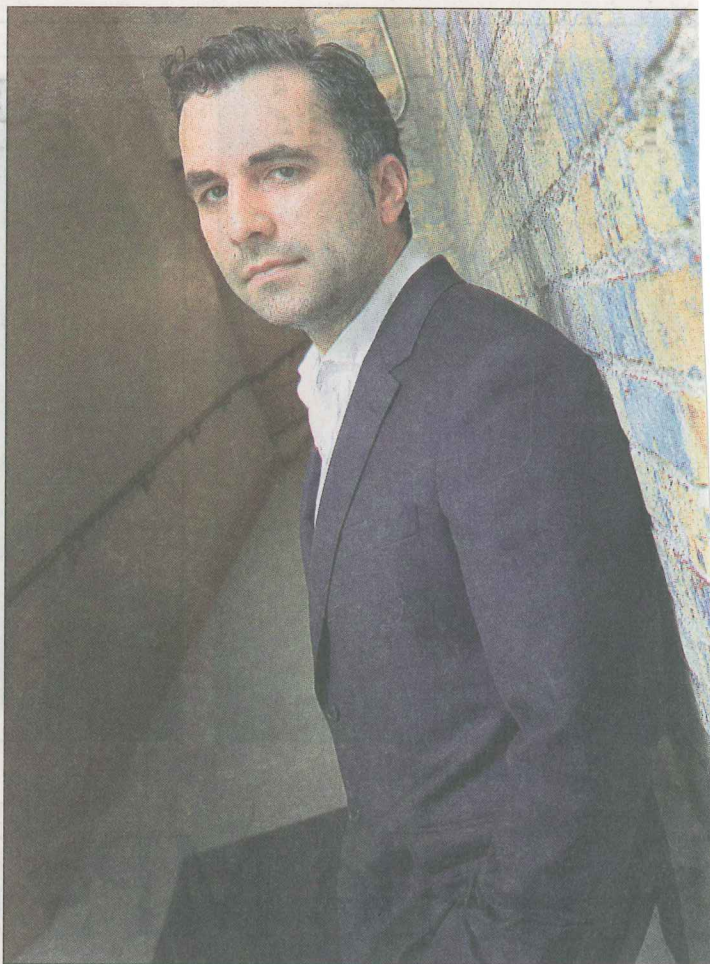
They're conditioned to violence and killing, not normal childhood activities, he said.

"When you have someone who's 10 or 12 years old and been a battalion leader, they're easily bored."

They would have needed a lot of strength and resilience to survive, though.

"You want to take that further and steer it to something good," he said.

For more information see www.song-forafrica.com.



Darcy Ataman will be leaving for his seventh trip to Africa later this month to help children conditioned to violence.

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