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War Child Television Series Joins Mine Awareness Campaign

"The Garden," one film in a new series entitled *War Child*, raises mine awareness and presents ways individuals may become involved with the issue.

by Whitney Tolliver, MAIC

The debilitating effects that landmines and pieces of UXO inflict on a society are a common reality for those living in contaminated areas, as well as for those working in the mine action community. Unfortunately, the severity of the problem is oftentimes unknown by those living in "mine-free" areas. Recently, however, there has been a trend to bring mine awareness campaigns into these "unaffected" societies. The work done by TV producer R.E. Altman is one such example.

"The Garden" is a one-hour drama that focuses on the specific problems many regions of the world face on a daily basis and offers a positive role groups and individuals can engage in to assist victims. It is the third film in a series entitled *War Child*. The series presents a broad array of issues that children face in war. The first film, "Abduction," is a story about the lives of child soldiers living in Uganda. "His Name is Daniel," the second film, illustrates the horrible treatment Bosnian women suffered during the Bosnian War, particularly that of Muslim women, and how the Serbs used rape as a tool of war. The programs together comprise a collection of first-person glimpses into the harsh realities facing the world today.

In an interview with Mr. Altman, he discussed some of the reasons for making the film, "The Garden." Like many Americans, he did not realize the seriousness of the issue of landmines and UXO. While he was conducting initial research

through the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) on the conditions children face in war, he discovered several of the major implications landmines have on communities in former war zones. Enlightened with this information and taken back by the large number of casualties, Altman began researching the issue in more depth. The producer consulted with Adopt-A-Minefield, the U.S. State Department and the newly released issue of the Journal of Mine Action on Landmines in Central and South America in order to gain more extensive background information and pursue a storyline.

The script for "The Garden" was set

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in the rural region of Latin America. Altman explained that this decision was of strategic importance. He said, "I very much wanted to do a landmine story that was part of our own hemisphere so that the audience, and particularly the student audience, would clearly get the message that landmines are not only a global problem but one right in our own backyard."

The timing of his research happened to coincide with the Third Meeting of States Parties to the Ottawa Treaty held

in Managua, Nicaragua, last year. Altman jumped at the opportunity to attend the convention. He flew down to Nicaragua and listened in on a number of the meetings that took place. After the convention, Altman met with the Minister of Defense, also the head of demining in Nicaragua, Dr. Jose Guerra. Dr. Guerra informed Altman that, through work conducted by his department with the Organization of American States (OAS) and other international groups, Nicaragua would become landmine-free by 2005. To date, they have cleared approximately half of the 140,000 landmines planted in the country during the war years.

Altman felt encouraged by the information and believed he could produce a film with an ending full of hope. While he was still in Nicaragua, Handicap In-

ternational coordinated a trip for him to visit six different families living in the mined mountain areas of the country. Talking with the children and landmine victims firsthand allowed the filmmaker to appreciate more fully the hardships and struggles these communities face on a daily basis.

"The Garden" is a fictional story, but one based on truth and actual events. It is the story of a 14-year-old girl named Maria whose family lives in a small moun-

tain village in Nicaragua, along the border with Honduras. The civil war between the Sandinista army and the Contra Rebels 14 years before has left her village littered with mines. After Hurricane Mitch ripped through the country in October 1998, Maria's village is swept by giant mudslides and many mines move from their marked-off areas. The entire village is left in an even more devastating state of desperation. Fields cannot be cultivated and cattle cannot graze because of the unknown locations of landmines. Maria "walks on tiny footpaths, never wandering" for fear of stepping on a mine. Then one day, while she takes her family's only cow to graze on a designated clear-field, she steps on a landmine and loses her leg.

After a long rehabilitation process, Maria is fitted with a prosthetic leg and relearns how to walk. She becomes friends with another child in the hospital, and he encourages her to share her story and the story of her village over the internet. A group of junior high school students in the United States discover Maria's story and decide to help. They are able to raise enough money to have the Nicaraguan army clear her village of mines, and growth and prosperity return to the village.

While the storyline is modeled on real events and facts, "The Garden" is a fable.

Altman explained that the "garden" is actually used to represent land healed by the removal of mines. The film also demonstrates that if individuals become involved with an issue, they can make a difference. Altman stressed, "I felt that using Nicaragua as an example would make the point, that by working together we could actually have an effect. If Nicaragua becomes one of the first demined nations, it will have a huge impact on motivating people, particularly youth culture, to get involved with the issue." The program is hosted by Paul and Heather McCartney, Goodwill Ambassadors for Adopt-A-Minefield. The Polus Center's Walking Unidos, the OAS, the ICBL and the U.S. State Department also helped with the production.

The series *War Child* and the film "The Garden" have been designed for a family audience. At present, an effort is being mounted to distribute the film to every school across the United States. Altman commented, "The concept of outreach, the idea that third world victims can create pen-pal relationships with first world students was a big part of this particular storyline. We want to introduce the film into classrooms so that kids can actually personalize the issue. It makes it more of a realistic issue for them if they know the people they are involved with and what the end results of their efforts

are." Mark Hyman, a middle school teacher and member of Global Care Unlimited, wrote a teacher's guide that will be used in coordination with the film to launch a landmine awareness initiative in schools. Their hope is that this effort will eventually culminate in a "Landmine Day" in schools across the country.

Hallmark Entertainment funded the series *War Child*. Efforts are underway to place the series on PBS within a year.

The U.S. State Department media note of the release of "The Garden" and the entire series can be found at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/13637.htm> ■

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