

Reading, writing and Angie Ruiz

Actress Angie Ruiz has a love for Tanzania—and is putting her money where her mouth is by starting a school in an effort to combat the Aids epidemic
Main photograph by Russell Baer

IF YOU LOOK HARD ENOUGH, Hollywood is home to a lot of well educated people. Some of the stereotypes are true: it has its share of people who are self-absorbed, the same sort of people for whom the SMS-enabled kettle was invented. But every now and then, a gem such as Angie Ruiz comes your way.

She has worked in several films: *Hades Night*, *In Your Eyes* and *Bee Season* (with Richard Gere), but it was her philanthropic ventures that rose above the usual Hollywood hype.

Hollywood celebrities, or any élite, can have a tendency to highlight causes—but not do a heck of a lot about it themselves. As Ruiz puts it, 'People go over there and bring their publicists and cameras, and a whole entourage. Then it's no longer the issue, but "I'm watching so and so." [You'd then] miss the whole point. ...

'There are celebrities always encouraging and asking someone to do something instead of going to [it themselves]. [In the] press conferences they give to tell other people to do something, they could have spent a week over there themselves really taking a look, and going anonymously. You can easily see for yourself.'

Ruiz lives what she believes. She went to Tanzania to do her bit to stop HIV and Aids; and hadn't invited half the world's press to follow her along to show what a humanitarian she is.

The Monterey Bay native and American Conservatory Theatre alumna volunteered with Cross-Cultural Solutions (CCS) and wound up creating a school which so far has 27 children. The aim is to improve on Tanzania's appalling 98 per cent illiteracy—the greatest stumbling block, according to Ruiz, who cites the figure, to any improvement in the HIV and Aids infection rate. (UNESCO disputes the figure, but the Tanzanian government's official site does state that literacy is dropping fast.)

Her motives stem from, she believes, her childhood. Her family insisted on a proper



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education for her first (she holds a degree in business administration from Cal Poly University), before she could opt for her own career. It is in contrast to Los Angeles: 'You don't have a lot of people that have done that. Oftentimes they work very hard and get somewhere, or they don't get there. [When they don't], they don't have anything to fall back on.'

Ruiz was fortunate to have arrived in Los Angeles with a network of friends in place, among them Jennifer Siebel (*Lucire* May 2004 and June 2005), with whom she worked on *Hades Night*. 'It's nice to have that. We come from good families who support us. We're really fortunate, because a lot of people don't have that.'

Ruiz, who is married to venture capitalist Mark Terbeek, places great strength on family, and is dismayed at the absence of values among some Hollywood couples. In addition, this viewpoint contributes to her desire to see families stay together in Tanzania, not broken through Aids.

Volunteering is nothing new for Ruiz. It goes back to her teenage years, and she knew this would take her abroad 'to a third-world country.'

'I backpacked by myself through southeast Asia. I love third world countries. I think there's something raw and beautiful there. The people are just so gorgeous on the inside. I don't know if I want to see the capitalistic characteristics of the first world in these people.'

'I got a chance to go through Africa and I could do something on the ground, and work in a fourth- or fifth-world—I wouldn't call it third-world—country.'

Through CCS, Ruiz was placed with WAMATA, a non-governmental organization raising awareness of HIV-Aids in Tanzania. WAMATA uses a drama group to combat the literacy problem, but Ruiz decided to take things further by setting up her own school, initially contacting one local who acted as a networker and headmistress. The school staff numbers 10, with a headmistress, six teachers and three coordinators. (Networking, said Ruiz, is the best way to contact people—for every 50

to 100 entrepreneurs, only about five would have the means to communicate via email. 'You can find one person who can be the liaison who can coordinate and translate.')

'I learned a lot about HIV-Aids, and there's a lot that people are unaware of in the States. I don't understand how they're missing this link [between illiteracy and infection].'

Ruiz is reading John le Carré's book *The Constant Gardener*, in which was asked: 'What's the point of running a Rolls-Royce ambulance service when nothing is done to prevent the accident?' Education, Ruiz believes, 'would cut that epidemic in half if not more. If people would funnel money into the school system, or, over there, to build schools privately.'

A private venture may have considerable success, believes Ruiz, speaking from investing herself. And from witnessing the less than ideal conditions: a hospital she worked at had 'volunteers helping to deliver babies, and they had no medical background.'

An American dollar goes a long way. 'The teacher's salary is \$50 a month. That goes a long way.' Three dollars covers one person's mud hut's rent for a month—with the drop in the Tanzanian shilling, that three dollars might go even further. 'My pay cheque from *Surf School* [Ruiz's next film, directed by Joel Silverman] went to the whole thing.'

Ruiz returns to Tanzania next month and wishes to continue her humanitarian work for the village of Tengeru and the children there. She is taking her husband, who she believes can help implement an infrastructure, while keeping the school at a grass roots' level.

She recommends experiences such as going to a Tanzanian village for others. 'They have no electricity, no running water. It's nice to live so simply. I think about it a lot, for example, when I can't get reception on a cellphone.' It removes the self-absorption that we have—and lets us focus back on people, and, hopefully, our world. Ruiz remains optimistic about the planet's chances. •

