



Adoption campaigners Dr Jane Aronson (left), the “orphan doctor”, and Deborra-lee Furness in New York.

Angels for ORPHANS

Actress Deborra-lee Furness has joined forces with the celebrity “orphan doctor” to save the world’s forgotten children. **Bryce Corbett** reports.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHELLE HOLDEN. STYLING BY OLIVIA FLEMING. HAIR BY RUBEN COLON. MAKE-UP BY BEAU NELSON. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHEE.

TO LOOK AT Deborra-lee Furness and Dr Jane Aronson on paper, they make the most unlikely of duos. One is an accomplished actress in her own right and the wife of Aussie Hollywood sensation, Hugh Jackman; the other a Brooklyn-born paediatrician, an international authority on childhood diseases in developing countries and the wearer of spectacular eyewear.

Yet to see them together in person and watch them interact with their adopted children is to understand the conviction

that unites them – that a loving family is the most basic human right of every child on the planet.

Via her charitable Worldwide Orphans Foundation, Dr Aronson – or the “orphan doctor” as she is more commonly known – is leading an international charge to highlight the plight of orphans around the world. Through her practice in Manhattan, she helps American couples who have adopted children from developing nations and whose new family members bring with them a legacy of exotic diseases from their country of origin.

Her most high-profile clients have been Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, who brought their adopted daughter, Zahara,

directly to her from the Ethiopian orphanage in which they found her.

“I know some of the kids that were next to my daughter [in the orphanage],” an emotional Angelina told a Worldwide Orphans Foundation charity gala in New York in 2005. “Two of them passed away, with symptoms very similar to hers. I really do believe that if I didn’t get her out at that time, she wouldn’t be here.”

Deborra-lee’s children, Oscar, 11, and Ava, six, were both adopted in the US, but the actress was only moved to resort to the American system when her attempts to adopt in Australia were bogged down in red tape. Through her work with children’s charities, Deborra-lee became ►

passionate about the plight of orphans around the world, bringing her into contact with Dr Aronson.

“The number of orphans in the world continues to rise, while the number of inter-country adoptions in Australia goes down,” Deborra-lee says. “In the meantime, there are children languishing in orphanages all over the world, desperate for a nurturing environment in which to grow up. People think I do this because I have two adopted children, but that’s not the case. I have been to Ethiopia and seen two-year-old kids walking the streets. I don’t know anyone who could walk past that and not want to do something.”

Deborra-lee will travel to Australia for National Adoption Awareness Week, November 6-13, to officiate at The Australian Women’s Weekly-sponsored breakfast summit on the subject and address the National Press Club on the need for government action.

“It has become a passion for me because if I hadn’t become an actress, I would have become a lawyer,” she explains. “And I am enraged at the huge injustice of it all. You only have to look at the figures to come to the inescapable conclusion that, as a country, we are anti-adoption.”

The huge injustice that Deborra-lee talks of is best illustrated by the statistics. UNICEF estimates there are some 13 million children in the world who have lost both their parents. In the last decade, according to figures from the

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federal Attorney-General’s department, which oversees inter-country adoption, Australia welcomes an average of about 330 international orphans every year.

The US processed some 11,000 inter-country adoptions last year alone – delivering orphans from countries such as China, Vietnam, Russia and Cambodia into the grateful arms of US families. In contrast, the Australian government allowed only 269 overseas orphans into the country in the calendar year 2008-2009, despite the many thousands of childless couples and hopeful parents queuing patiently to build a family.



Dr Aronson with her adopted sons, Des, 13, and Ben, 11.

According to Deborra-lee, it’s a statistical imbalance of which we ought to be ashamed. “Obviously, adoption is a part of my daily experience and that motivates me,” she says. “I can watch those World Vision ads and think, ‘That

could be my son, that could be my daughter’. But I also just want every kid in the world to know what it is to be part of a family.”

From the pretty New Jersey township of Maplewood, where she lives with her partner, Diana, and the two sons they adopted from Ethiopia and Vietnam, Des, 13, and Ben, 11, Dr Aronson keeps a close eye on the evolving legislative environment for inter-country adoption in Western countries. And Australia, she says, is moving at glacial speed.

“I love how generous and kind Australians are,” she says. “As a people,

you travel and discover poverty and needy children, and you want to adopt to help them, but the legal system at home just slaps you down.

“It’s an overly protective system that operates from the default position that every orphan in a developing country is a suspected victim of child trafficking. And while caution is commendable, it shouldn’t be used as an excuse to shut down the entire system.”

Underlining the urgency of the situation, according to Dr Aronson’s research, is the fact that for every three months a child spends in an orphanage, they lose a crucial month of development. “While governments prevaricate and clog the system with bureaucratic procedures, children are spending their most important formative years institutionalised,” says Dr Aronson.

The problem in Australia, apart from the very real, very serious spectre of creating an international market for children, seems to be that no one ►



Deborra-lee and husband Hugh Jackman adore their adopted children, Ava, six, and Oscar, 11. "I just want every kid in the world to know what it is to be part of a family," Deborra-lee says.

Writing in the preamble to the report, Ms Bishop said, "The committee was surprised to find a general lack of support for adoption – both local and inter-country – in most of the state and territory welfare departments, which are responsible for processing all adoption applications. The lack of support ranged from indifference to hostility, much to the distress of prospective parents seeking to adopt children from overseas."

The report called for a centralising of authority for inter-country adoption within the office of the attorney-general, a harmonising of disparate state and territory procedures, and a divesting of more control to accredited NGOs in the adoption approval process.

"These children overseas will face a better future in a loving family in Australia than living on the street or in an orphanage in their country of origin," Ms Bishop concluded.

In the six years since, the attorney-general's office has produced an Inter-country Adoption Strategic Plan and

government agency wants to accept responsibility for inter-country adoption.

While the office of federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland oversees the issue broadly, ensuring Australia upholds its obligations as a signatory to the Hague Convention (an international agreement crafted partly to protect children from trafficking), the nuts and bolts of the adoption process are presided over by individual state and territory governments, and their respective welfare agencies.

The result is a confusing, multi-layered labyrinth of bureaucracy into which prospective parents pour hopes and dreams, and submit themselves to a series of exhausting checks, only to spend up to six years waiting just to learn whether they are considered suitable parent material.

Adoption, it appears, has become a political hot potato that no one wants to touch. It's a lesson federal MP Bronwyn Bishop learned in 2005 when she chaired a parliamentary committee examining ways of improving the rate of inter-country adoption in Australia.

appointed a national advisory group. A member of that advisory group, Dr Karleen Gribble, told *The Weekly* the issue was "a very complicated one" and that the Australian government's cautious approach to the processing of adoptions from overseas was sensible.

"There have been children who have come to Australia who were trafficked," she said. "No family wants to adopt a child who has been incorrectly identified as an orphan and unjustly removed from his or her birth family."

When contacted to explain why Australia has the world's second lowest rate of inter-country adoption, a spokesperson for the attorney-general replied that the drop in numbers here was consistent with a worldwide decline in adoptions across borders.

In an emailed statement, the department said that there are currently more parents wanting to adopt than there are orphans in "partner countries" and that "in response, [partner countries] have tightened eligibility criteria for prospective adoptive parents, reduced inter-country adoption quotas and placed moratoriums on inter-country adoption".

Responding to queries about why Australia closed down its inter-country adoption program with Ethiopia, the statement added, "Australia has core obligations to work with other countries to prevent the abduction, sale or trafficking in children".

For Deborra-lee and Dr Aronson, while the fears of child trafficking are real and the vetting of orphans and adopting families has to be zealous, it shouldn't be an excuse for shutting down programs and blacklisting entire countries. "I find it very difficult to believe there are more parents wanting children than there are orphans in the world in need of a home," says Dr Aronson.

"Don't get me wrong. I think adopting families should be made to jump through hoops, there has to be complete accountability," says Deborra-lee. "I think every possible check and balance

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needs to be undertaken to establish that a child is an orphan, and there has to be transparency in the process to ensure that there is no corruption or trafficking.

"But the fear of trafficking is so great, it is used as an excuse to shut down entire programs. Meanwhile, millions of children are left to grow up never knowing the unconditional love of parents." ■

The Australian Women's Weekly's and Deborra-lee Furness will host a breakfast summit on reforming Australia's adoption procedures in Sydney, on November 7. See www.aww.com.au for details. Deborra-lee Furness will address the National Press Club on November 9. For further information on Worldwide Orphans, visit www.wwo.org.