



Rachel Andres

The Power of One

How a 46-year-old mother of two changed a continent—and her own life.

By Jenny Hazan

The genocide in Darfur, Sudan, continues to rage into its fifth year. Since early 2003, an estimated 400,000 people have died as a result of violence, disease, and malnutrition at the hands of the Sudanese government and Arab militias known as the Janjaweed. Some 3.5 million people have been displaced; more than 250,000 refugees have crossed the border into Chad, spilling into 12 different refugee camps, exhausting the country's resources, and increasing tensions between the refugees and members of the local population.

For several years, reports on conditions in the Chad camps, populated primarily by women and children, began to indicate an alarming rate of rape and violence against the female refugees at the hands of roaming Arab militiamen.

The attacks were taking place whenever the women and children strayed from the confines of the camp to perform the critical task of collecting the firewood necessary to cook the rice, pasta, beans, and other dry foods rationed to them by relief agencies.

To make matters worse, Sudanese culture historically ostracizes both raped women and the children born of the violent union.

"In all the reports I read, this issue kept coming up, again and again," recalls Rachel Andres, then a freelance consultant for Jewish World Watch (JWW), a coalition of some 60 synagogue communities in the Greater Los Angeles Area founded by Rabbi Harold Schulweis in 2004 to combat genocides and other atrocities around the world.

JWW, whose three-pronged mission is advocacy, education, and refugee relief, had already begun working with Darfuri refugees in Chad. JWW had sponsored the construction of three medical clinics; built communal wells in the camps; provided psychosocial counselors for victims of trauma; handed out educational, health, and hygiene supplies to kids in the camps via the Backpack Project; and launched a camps-wide radio program, *She Speaks, She Listens*, aimed at educating Darfuri women, particularly about gender-based violence issues.

Andres was hired to helm a new initiative, to find an answer to the firewood collection and rape issue for the JWW Women's Committee—shortly thereafter the JWW Solar Cooker Project was born. "We wanted to do something, but being a small, grassroots organization in L.A., what could we do?" she asks.

Fate provided the answer. While

doing a search on the Internet, Andres discovered the Ko-Zon Foundation, an environmental organization based in the Netherlands that was working with many communities across rural Africa to cope with inadequate access to energy for domestic use, and at the same time to combat deforestation and desertification. The organization's founder, Dr. Derk Rijks, dedicated his life to teaching Africans how to harness the energy of the sun for cleaning, farming, and cooking.

The latter required a relatively inexpensive and simple contraption called a solar cooker, a sun-powered device made essentially of cardboard and aluminum foil. "This was it!" recalls an excited Andres. "This was one solution to the rape problem in Chad!"

Rijks had not worked in Chad before, though the climate, boasting an average of 330 days of sunlight per year, was perfect for solar cooking. In no time, Andres connected with him, along with TchadSolaire, an NGO that would provide solar cooker training on the ground to the refugees, and NGO Solar Cookers International, which would supply technical assistance. Additionally, Andres won the cooperation of both CARE International and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which run the camps together.

Back in the U.S., Andres put together a large-scale national educational and fundraising campaign, and in May 2006, the Solar Cooker Project kicked off. Excitement quickly spread across the U.S., Canada, and Australia, and over \$1 million was raised by January 2008, far exceeding the initial \$50,000 target. By then, each one of the 5,000 families in the Iridimi refugee camp (totaling a population of more than 17,000 people, 80 percent of whom are widows and children) were equipped and trained to use solar cookers. Practically overnight, incidents of rape and violence against the women in the camp dropped by 86 percent, according to a recent evaluation.

According to Andres, the secret of the project's remarkable success lies in its approach: Putting power into the hands of the people—both the refugees in Chad and the

donors in the U.S.

It costs \$30 to outfit one family with two solar cookers (one for grain, one for sauce), two pots, holders, and training. "It's a kind of philanthropy anyone can do. You don't have to be wealthy to make a difference," says Andres, who explains that most of the more than \$1.3 million in donations to the project to date derived from more than 20,000 contributors, a vast majority of whom sent in \$30 checks. "People want to help the people of Darfur, but the problem is so big, most people are overwhelmed by it and feel powerless," she says. "This project makes the plight accessible to caring individuals. It gives them a concrete way to help."



Andres, accepting the 2008 Charles Bronfman Prize from Charles Bronfman.
Photo by Bill Stanton

There is also something to be said, she says, for the cut-and-dry nature of the project because "\$30 equals a kit for one family. The impact of the donation on the life of one family is straightforward and easily quantifiable; a direct equation can be made between the amount of money given and the amount of assistance."

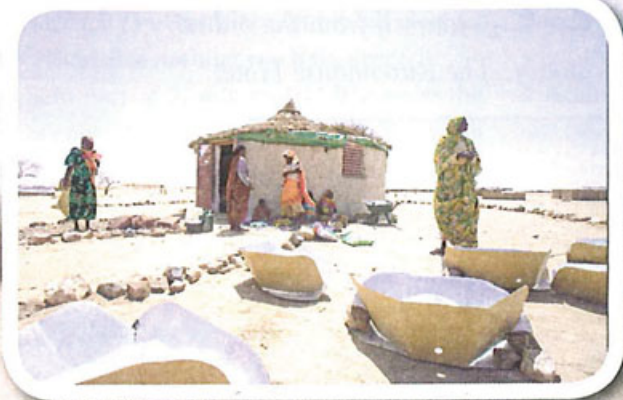
Because of its accessibility and simplicity, hundreds of groups and individuals have made the initiative their own. "When people talk about the Solar Cooker Project, they speak about it as if it is *their* project," says Andres, who lists among the grassroots spin-off initiatives a 12-year-old girl from Redondo Beach, California, who sold over 4,000 painted rocks for \$1 apiece. "It's not my accomplishment. It's so many peoples' accomplishments. I am deeply proud of the commitment of the people in the U.S. who have supported the project."

Another positive result of the project is that it has brought together all sorts of disparate social groups to fundraise jointly. Synagogues, churches, college students, and Girl Scouts have all banded together to raise money. "Just today we received a check totaling \$2,511.72 from the Har Sinai congregation, St. Mark's United Methodist Church, and the Towson Catholic High School, all from Maryland," says Andres. "This project has brought together many interfaith coalitions. I love that we are speaking up in coalition."



**Refugee women from Darfur
in the Iridimi refugee camp**

Photos by Barbara Grover



use solar cookers in Chad.

"A lot of people say there is apathy in the Western world and I disagree completely," she says. "I really do think that people care, and if you give them a way in, an opportunity to discover that they can make a difference in the world, they will."

The same can be said of the world of the Chad camps, where the Solar Cooker Project has put power into the hands of thousands of refugee women. Alongside the safety benefits of the cookers, which bypass the need for dangerous excursions outside the camp for firewood; the environmental benefits (two solar cookers can save one ton of wood each year); the health and safety benefits for the women, who no longer need to tend to a smoky fire in the desert heat; and the lifestyle boost, since the cookers are cleaner and free up the women's time, enabling them to attend to other tasks, the project has also given the Darfuri women a newfound sense of empowerment.

In both Iridimi, and in the project's second camp, Touloum, where the population of refugees totals 22,000, the Solar Cooker Project has set up "CooKit" manufacturing plants, run entirely by the refugee women. Together, the plants employ some 100 women, who assemble the cookers, paint cooking pots, sew cooker carrying bags, weave baskets that keep cooked food hot, and train women to use the cookers. To date, these women, the project's chief ambassadors, have manufactured and distributed more than 16,000 cookers, and have trained hundreds.

"The manufacturing plant at Iridimi is really something to behold," says Andres, who visited the two camps in October 2007 as part of a team sent to evaluate the success of the project.

"There was no electricity in that place, but it felt electric. There was a buzz there like nothing you have ever felt.

"By making them part of it, this project has given the women a sense of control over their destiny and a sense of pride to be able to contribute to their household," says Andres. "It has also given them skills that they will be able to take home with them when, hopefully, they return home."

Although the project has been wildly successful, it has not been without its challenges. To start, it was not easy to get women, who have been cooking on a traditional three-stone fire for thousands of years, to change.

"There were a lot of international organizations that didn't believe solar cooking was a viable option for these refugees. They simply didn't believe the women would do it," says Andres, who adds that the project necessitated a significant educational component. "If you were to just drop the cookers in front of them and say, 'Here, cook,' no one would do it. If you gave them to Americans that way, we wouldn't do it, either. But done correctly, with training, we have proven that the women will indeed use the cookers."

According to Andres, it is a big challenge to convince people that the cookers actually do work. "Until they see it with their own eyes, a lot of people who are very educated about the world and about solar energy don't get that you can cook food with the energy of the sun," she says. "In fact, every time I do it, I am sort of surprised when I open the lid of the pot and the rice or oatmeal is cooked. There is no fire, no wood, no flame, so it's a hard thing to imagine that it really cooks. But it does."

Then there's the issue of the cookers themselves, which, due to their fragility and the harsh climatic conditions in Chad, need to be replaced every four to six months. This adds up to a recurring annual cost of approximately \$150,000 in the Iridimi camp alone.

But the biggest challenge for the project, according to Andres, is working in an unstable region. "There are lots of work stoppages," says Andres, who recounts the time that Rijks was held up by armed rebels and had his wallet, supplies, and passport stolen. "Thank God he wasn't harmed

physically. It's a dangerous place, and you can only do what you can do given the realities on the ground."

Against all odds, Andres has persevered. "You can't give up," she says. "You have to keep on pushing forward."

Andres is no stranger to the challenges of difficult social projects. She has carved out a career of hands-on humanitarian work, starting with her very first job, as director of the Commission on Cults and Missionaries for the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

At the same time, Andres was volunteering at the AIDS Project L.A.'s Necessities of Life warehouse, where people with HIV and AIDS could come on a weekly basis to pick up groceries and toiletries for free. She

also volunteered for several years at the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women, a hotline where she counseled women who had been attacked.

"I am attracted to helping people when they are their most vulnerable," says Andres. "Unfortunately, not all of us have a support system in place to help us through those times."

For Andres, a 46-year-old mother of two, the drive to help people in need is what defines her most centrally as a Jew. "I was raised in the social action mode of *tikun olam*, with the understanding that it is the Jewish responsibility to protect the vulnerable—both Jews and non-Jews alike," says Andres, who grew up as an active member in the Reform movement in Dallas, Texas.

IT IS THESE INTRINSICALLY JEWISH VALUES THAT won Andres the 2008 Charles Bronfman Prize on May 6. She was the first woman to take the \$100,000 award, meant to bring public recognition to the vision and talent of an individual or team, under 50 years of age, whose humanitarian work has contributed significantly to the betterment of the world.

"Rachel has created a movement, and inspired young people to help women tens of thousands of miles away; women whose names will never be known to them," said Canadian philanthropist Charles Bronfman at the official presentation of the award at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City. Accepting the award in the pres-



Andres with women in the Iridimi refugee camp.
Photo by Barbara Groves

ence of prize judges such as Canadian Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella, and former Israeli minister of justice and finance Dan Meridor, Bronfman added of Andres, "This is the highest form of the Jewish concept of *tzedakah*: social justice."

Andres comes by her values honestly. When her father, Dave Andres, closed his grocery store in Dallas, there remained a box full of unpaid IOUs from people in the neighborhood who couldn't afford to pay him. "He never intended to collect the money from them," Andres says, explaining that he only kept the IOU box up to date for the sake of preserving the "borrowers'" dignity. "He always trusted the good in people, and I saw that as such an important value. He was a generous, wonderful man."

Andres's mother, Ruth, started the first hot meals program for needy kids in a preschool in Dallas. A full-time teacher, she volunteered teaching English as a second language to new Russian immigrants to Dallas, and served as a court-appointed advocate for abused children.

"Both of my parents were very involved in Jewish and non-Jewish philanthropies and social action work. I grew up thinking that every family gave to every worthy cause," says Andres. "I had really good role models."

But Andres's greatest influence was her *bubbie*, Chaya Ruchel Andres, who left Poland for Texas in 1919 and lost her entire 22-member family in the Holocaust. In addition to helping new immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe settle in the U.S., she wrote four books of Yiddish poetry. Andres's favorite of her poems is called "Two Dolls," which depicts the parallel stories of two dolls, both born at the same manufacturer, one ending up with a wealthy little girl, the other a poor little girl. "Her goal was not only to help other people," says Andres, "but to teach all of us that it was our obligation to help other people, too."

Andres draws a strong parallel between the survivors of Darfur and the survivors of the Holocaust. One day when she was in Chad, one of the women in the Touloum refugee camp, Zanuba, retold the story of her village, which suffered an aerial attack. Everyone in the village grabbed their children and ran, but Zanuba's best friend, who had

gone into labor and was in the midst of delivering twins, was unable to run. Zanuba was forced to make the hardest decision of her life. In the end, she left her friend behind and saved her family. She later found out that the woman and both of her babies had been slaughtered. "They come from such different times, such different places, they are such different people, everything about their lives is so different," says Andres. "But if you closed your eyes, it was like hearing the story of a Holocaust survivor. It was mind-blowing."

"Just as I promised my grandmother I would bear witness and tell our family's story, I promised the people of Iridimi and Touloum that I would bear witness to the stories of their families. If people had spoken out during the Holocaust, or Rwanda, or Bosnia, or Cambodia, or any of the 40-some genocides of various proportions that have taken place since the Holocaust, history could have been written differently. Nobody was there to protect my family, but I hope to play a role in protecting these families. I will not stand idly by."

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Thanks to the Charles Bronfman Prize, Andres plans to introduce the Solar Cooker Project to more refugee camps in Chad. "My vision is that within two to three years, we will have attracted the partnership of the UNHCR and other NGOs, and will have Solar Cooker Projects functioning in all 12 camps in Chad," says Andres, who estimates that for each camp, the first year of the project will cost \$350,000, and \$150,000 for each subsequent year. "We want to ensure not just that we can start the project, but that we can maintain it for years to come," she says. "There are some 210,000 refugees still in need of help. Can we help them all? Yes, I believe we can. And if we can empower all the refugees of Darfur and help them to recover from the atrocities they have endured, that would be success."

Andres also hopes to use some of the prize money to encourage more Jewish youth to make a career of humanitarian work. "I want to engage more young people in the project, and inspire them to realize that they *can* make their profession out of this sort of work," says Andres. "As our tradition teaches, 'It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, yet you are not free to desist from it, either.'" **LM**