



PUBLICATION  
Jul 5, 2020

CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## “WAR CHILD” BY MICHAELA DEPRINCE

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



As a ballerina with the Dutch National Ballet, dancing is my way of talking. I can let go of everything and my emotions remain pure. My imagination and the ability to express myself through dance help me to be my best self. There on stage, I am myself. For in my performance lies everything: my past, present and future. In fact, I've spent a great deal of time on stage. Not just dancing but also to share my past. The first time I told my story to an audience was about five years ago at the TEDxAmsterdam conference. This was when I started wondering what my purpose in life is; what can I bring to this world? I realised that my purpose is to give back by helping others see their own potential and everything they can accomplish.

So, with this new purpose I started speaking at events around the world, trying my best to make a difference. But I felt like it wasn't enough. I decided then that I needed support children whose lives started just like mine. I started working with War Child Holland and became their ambassador. War Child Holland is a well-known Dutch non-governmental organisation helping children all over the world who are affected by conflict. It offers them a well-thought through and scientifically proven combination of protection, education and—last but not least—psychosocial support.

I had the opportunity to go to Uganda in 2017 and to Lebanon in 2018 to witness first-hand the amazing work that War Child does for children who are dealing with the effects of some of the worst conflicts of our time. These visits made for an incredible experience but a heart-breaking one as well. I felt connected with all the little girls and boys I met. They reminded me of my time growing up amid a bloody civil war in my own country, Sierra Leone. About 50,000 men, women and children were killed. My parents were among the dead.

I had been born with vitiligo, a skin condition which caused patches of my skin to lose its pigment and turn white. This resulted in me being exposed to ridicule and harassment in the orphanage I grew up in. They called me the devil's child. Both my time in and outside the orphanage have taught me about cruelty—the harsh reality—that many young people around the world face on a daily basis.

One morning when I was a child the dusty wind blew an old yellowed magazine down the street onto the orphanage gate. On the cover was a picture of a beautiful ballerina en pointe. I didn't know what she was doing in the photo when I first saw her and that didn't matter much to me. Of course, I noticed her pink tutu and the fact that she was doing something I'd never seen before. But what planted the seed of hope – that I hadn't felt in a long time – was that she looked so happy and content; that all I knew right away was that I had to be this person. Just maybe if I did what she did, I could be happy one day too. My American adoptive parents were ultimately my salvation. I spent the next years of my childhood in the United States where ballet became my vocation. I wanted to be a ballerina.

My dream came true. Turn your past; your scars into your strength. That’s what I always try to do. Through vital psychosocial support, War Child gives children the help I could only have wished for when I was a child. They give them the opportunity to play and dream again.

That’s why it makes me so happy that more and more attention is given internationally to this specific kind of support which enables children to deal with their past and move forward. This week my hometown Amsterdam will host a world summit about mental health in crisis situations. Ministers from all over the world will attend. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) invited me to share my story and to shed a light on the increasing need for—and discussion around—psychosocial support for children in emergency settings. A support which is carefully tailored to the individual situation which I believe is crucial. Unfortunately, I know too well what a lack of support—in a mental health and wellbeing context—can provoke.

But it’s still not enough for me. That’s why I’m having my own gala Dare to Dream on 4 November in Amsterdam to raise as much money as possible for children whose lives never deserved to start the way they did. A chance to give them the hope they deserve. It will be a truly amazing event. A night full of great international artists contributing voluntarily to a better future for all children affected by war. They are all friends of mine who wish to pledge their support to me and War Child in achieving our future dreams together. Because we have no influence on our past anymore. On our future? Yes, we do. Look ahead. However difficult that may be sometimes. Let your unique talent be a part of your dream.





