



Alicia's

Quest

Music star and new mom Alicia Keys tells WebMD what drives her to travel the world to help kids affected by AIDS and **how you can help**

Quest

Fourteen-time Grammy Award-winning artist Alicia Keys, 30, had her first baby more than a year ago, a handsome bundle of joy named Egypt. He has “the most perfect eyes and beautiful nose, the sweetest lips and skin so soft and kissable! Never have I felt such disbelief, such awe, humility, godliness, such strength, power, and possibility,” the singer gushes about her son on her blog. Keys and her husband, music producer, rapper, and entrepreneur Swizz Beatz, 33, chose the unusual moniker as a nod to the enduring power of the ancient pyramids built more than two millennia ago in Africa.

Long before Keys fully understood the similarly enduring power of a parent’s love, she found the massive scale of suffering among the world’s children too dire to ignore. After touring impoverished South Africa for the first time eight years ago, she saw up close how that suffering compounds when HIV is involved.

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“If I can help one person, five people, 10 people, 100, 200, 100,000 people...that’s what’s real.”

Keys with locals in the Ezimbuzini township outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, while visiting Keep a Child Alive-funded sites. KCA has helped an estimated 250,000 AIDS patients and their families, many of them children.



“I couldn’t turn my back on all I’d seen,” Keys tells WebMD. She’d witnessed AIDS orphans and widows across that continent struggling to survive; babies and kids of all ages battling the ravages of the disease they’d inherited from their infected parents; and the elderly—poor and often incapacitated themselves—caring for their dead children’s offspring because no one else was left to do the job. An entire generation had been destroyed.

Enter AIDS activist Leigh Blake. She is the innovative producer behind the 1990s’ “Red Hot + Blue,” the first concert event and album that banded together musical artists for AIDS efforts. Blake invited Keys to join her on that first eye-opening trip back in 2002, lobbying the voice behind such hits as “Fallin’” and “A Woman’s Worth” to use her clout to shine a light on the global AIDS movement and to get involved herself.

The two toured threadbare medical clinics and destitute villages where the poorest of Africans needed the simplest of interventions: antiretroviral medications (ARVs), which at that time were neither affordable nor accessible in third-world nations.

“We don’t see more than 16 million U.S. orphans in America because we don’t allow it to happen,” Blake says. “In the United States, if you need the drugs, you get the drugs. But not too long ago, if you were poor in Africa and had no voice, you didn’t. And you died.”

When a pharmaceutical company began making a generic version of ARVs in 2003 for just \$500 annually—the original patented drugs tallied \$11,000 per year, an astronomical figure for all but the world’s wealthiest citizens—they knew mass distribution had finally become feasible.

“Leigh said to me: ‘I think I can find a way to engage the public and provide these medicines,’” Keys recalls. “So I said to her: ‘You figure that out, and I’m there!’”

“At the time, I didn’t have a child”—Keys was then 22—“but I was empathetic to these young people I met [in Africa],

so close to my age. It really struck me how I had to pay attention. What if I was 15 going through what these kids are going through, and nobody paid attention? To have to deal with all the things a teenager has to deal with, on top of being the ‘parent’ and breadwinner, and putting food on the table for younger brothers and sisters who might be 3, or 7, or 10...it wasn’t about how impossible it was, but, rather, if I can help one person, five people, 10 people, 100, 200, 100,000 people...that’s what’s real.”

Starting Keep a Child Alive

Keys signed on in 2003 as co-founder of Keep a Child Alive (keepachildalive.org)

with Blake and became the organization’s public face. To date, KCA has helped an estimated 250,000 AIDS patients and their families, many of them children. The group provides lifesaving medications, urgent care clinics, follow-up treatment and counseling, much-needed orphanages, and continuing education. They also offer skills training to help the young and widowed learn new trades. Facilities and health care staff are located in Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and India.

The ARVs are key. Laura Guay, MD, vice president of research at the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation and research professor at the George Washington

University School of Public Health and Health Services, explains how ARVs work.

“ARVs are combinations of drugs that target different parts of the virus’s reproductive cycle,” Guay tells WebMD. “Limiting the virus’s reproduction is a critical factor in fighting AIDS. However, HIV can mutate and develop resistance to these drugs. So multiple drugs are needed in multiple combinations to manage HIV as a chronic disease, one that a person can live with as long as the drugs are accessible.”

Among the biggest challenges for KCA and other organizations administering ARVs, Guay adds, are accessibility along with monitoring viral loads to detect the

The 3 Keys to Alicia’s Inspiration

For a woman credited with a catalog of famous songs, Keys cites just one as the soundtrack for her life: Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good.” The lyrics are optimistic: “It’s a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life for me, and I’m feeling good...” And with her union to music producer, rapper, and entrepreneur Swizz Beatz still in the honeymoon stage, and son, Egypt, celebrating his first birthday this past October, the song means more than ever to Keys. Here are some ways Keys “feels good.”

Be grateful. “No matter what’s happening in the world, every day is a brand new breath, a brand new chance, a brand new path to feeling good,” the singer says. “I take every opportunity to live, and I’m so grateful for every day—even more grateful now that I’m a mother and wife with such a strong foundation and with such a beautiful family. I see how phenomenal life can be.”

Give back. “The most incredible thing is to change a child’s life,” says Keys, who is co-founder of Keep a Child Alive (keepachildalive.org), an organization that delivers antiretroviral medications plus health care support and long-term assistance to HIV-infected populations in Africa and India. “We have to ask, what kind of life can these kids have without their parents?” she says, referring to the 16.6 million children orphaned by AIDS worldwide. “It’s incredible what the medicine will do and how it will turn lives around.”

Love yourself first. “If you can’t love yourself, how can you take care of others?” asks Keys. “Watching what you put into your body and eliminating anything that could possibly hurt you in any way are extremely important.” During her pregnancy, Keys says she “made more of an effort because you know it’s not just you in there—whatever you’re eating, the baby is eating, too. I did yoga, I love to run, and with Egypt I continue to be healthy in what I eat, what I feed him, and how I exercise. It makes me feel better!”

“It’s really so important to care for yourself first, then you can give your love to everyone else.”—LPK



PREVIOUS PAGE: JOHN WRIGHT; LEFT: BRIAN BRAFF

KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES



Keys, center, with her mother, right, and grandmother, left.

amount of HIV in the bloodstream. “In Africa, critical resources and tools are simply not there. So the general principle is to choose groups of drugs that are most likely to treat most of the population with



Keys and husband Swizz Beatz.

minimal side effects—and that are also cost-effective.”

And when resistance sets in? “That’s the difference between first-line and second-line medications,” Guay explains. “We try to offer the affordable, easy-to-manage drugs first. Then, over time, bring out others.”

Keys points out that securing funding and accessibility for these second-line medications has become KCA’s most important goal. “That, and we’re so close to finding a cure,” says Keys.

“Already, new research has shown that in 96% of cases, patients on ARVs aren’t spreading the disease,” Keys says. “That means AIDS can be stopped. Our ultimate goal is for Keep A Child Alive not to exist. When there are no more infected kids or parents, we would love, most of all, not to be needed.”

“Alicia is right,” Guay confirms. “What we’ve seen is that in discordant couples, where one spouse is HIV-positive and the other isn’t, when the positive partner is given ARVs, in more than 95% of cases he isn’t transmitting HIV to his spouse, even if they are sexually active.

“ARVs decrease viral loads to undetectable levels, making the likelihood of infecting someone else, or a mother transmitting the virus to her child, decrease significantly,” Guay adds. “It’s not a cure yet, but

it’s a significant development in halting the spread of AIDS in these populations.”

Creativity and Career

Like so many working mothers, Keys juggles pressing commitments while trying to strike a balance between work and family. In addition to her ongoing activism with KCA, there is, of course, her mega-recording career. (Her breakout

Help Alicia Keys Keep a Child Alive

Medications, long-term health care, and facilities cost money—lots of it. WebMD asks singer/songwriter Alicia Keys, who grew up modestly with a single mother in New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen, “is the biggest obstacle in fighting AIDS one of simple dollars and cents?”

“Honestly, yes,” says Keys, who has raised more than \$13 million since 2004 for Keep a Child Alive with her annual “Black Ball” events in London and New York (this year, in June and November, respectively). The shows draw “passionate artists who might not ever be found on the same stage,” she enthuses, stars such as Sheryl Crow, David Bowie, Usher, John Mayer, and Sade, who donate their time to perform and raise funds.

“Sometimes we watch the news and things seem so out of hand,” Keys says. “We feel that there’s nothing we can do. Or we think in order to donate we have to give \$100 or \$500. You can give \$1, or even 50 cents a month, and these very small amounts add up and make a difference.”

In honor of World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, Keys invites everyone reading this article to take on a challenge: “Imagine if every WebMD reader gave a single dollar to help end AIDS...A single dollar can change the world.” To help, go to keepachildalive.org.—LPK

TOP: ERIK C. PENDZICH/REX USA/BEI/IMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE PAGE: JOHN WRIGHT

album, *Songs in A Minor*, was just re-released to celebrate its 10th anniversary.) She also acts. She was last seen opposite Queen Latifah and Jennifer Hudson in the 2008 film *The Secret Life of Bees*. She produces, too, bringing the play *Stick Fly* to Broadway this winter. Keys writes on her blog: “To produce a play like this is a dream come true...And to have the chance to share it with an audience, night after night, in a beautiful theater, on the streets that I walked everyday as a kid with only ‘a pocket full of dreams’ can only be described as modern-day magic.”

Now add director to the list. In October, the Lifetime Network aired *Five*, a film about five women’s lives, all touched by breast cancer. Keys was tapped to direct one of the five interconnected segments, along with Jennifer Aniston, Demi Moore, Penelope Spheeris, and Patty Jenkins.

“To be a director is something I always wanted to do,” she says. “It’s a beautiful dance, a beautiful orchestra, and all these parts make the music. That’s how I hear it. That’s how I see it. I loved it! It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life.” Plus, she jokes, “to watch the actors go into hair-and-makeup and not have to go in myself” made her love it even more.

Love is a word that falls often from Keys’ lips, especially when the name Egypt comes up: “Motherhood is a billion times better than I expected, and I already expected it to be great,” she says.

“It’s all the things everyone ever said, but you don’t know it until you’re there. It’s a really special time, and I feel so honored that I get to help somebody in this world find his wings, and navigate and learn happiness, and be loved. Actually, he’s helping me learn, because I’m smarter now. He’s awesome! I’m having a ball!”

So how does she nurture her creative side while also nurturing a new baby and husband? “I feel like I’m more balanced than I’ve been in my life, actually,” she muses.

“I felt a lot less balanced about five years ago. More than ever, I consider everything I do now, and make sure it’s something I can’t live without and something I believe in. There has to be a

powerful reason to do it, one that makes me feel great.”

Keys continues: “There are a lot of things I can’t do now. Having my son and a family, that’s my barometer, when before I was maybe more inclined to say ‘yes’ and

do more—and then be super-exhausted and overspent.

“Life is balance. It’s all a balance,” Keys says. “And if there’s something you’re thinking about, and it’s something you really want in your life, then you will—you’ll do it.” ●

“Motherhood is a billion times better than I expected, and I already expected it to be great.”

