

## **Interview on *The Link Africa*, Radio Canada International**

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South African Woman Discovers Herself In Canada.



Dr. Wilhelmina Fredericks

“If I had not been in Canada, I am sure that I wouldn’t have been able to fulfill my dreams in South Africa. I would have probably just moved a yard but now I have moved forward a thousand yards and more,” says Wilhelmina Fredericks.

She is a surprise, she doesn’t look 70 years old or walk or talk that age. Dr. Fredericks, who actually prefers to be simply referred to as Wilhelmina, has had a fascinating life that seems to be filled with excitement. In 1988, she founded Zerf Productions, a non-profit charitable organization involved in the creative arts and humanitarian missions. Its mandate includes serving disadvantaged communities at home and abroad. The organization does not limit its scope to any one ideology, gender, or ethnic group, Dr. Fredericks says.

Her work has earned Dr. Fredericks a multitude of awards from various government and community organizations in Canada, the United States and South Africa.

Dr. Fredericks visited our studios to speak about her journey from South Africa to Canada. Here is the full transcript of our conversation.

**Q: As a little girl what were your dreams?**

I was very fond of movies and I always wanted to know how the picture got into the camera. I would skip school just to go watch, sit there and wonder and I always said even if I had to go to a faraway land, I'm going to find out how it works.

**Q: How did you end up in Canada?**

My father died when I was six years old. My mother had to go work for the white people as a cook to support us. My grandmother, who is a typical Dutch woman, raised me. She ruled with an iron fist. She also instilled the European culture and values in me.

At the age of 15, I started working in a factory. Every year, the factory would give a month off on holiday and the group would organise the safari and mountain climbing. When I was about 18 years old, I travelled with a group to Kenya. Our lorry was flagged by a man standing by the roadside. He asked for a ride and when he found out that we were going on a safari, he joined. He was Canadian and his name was Edwin Fowlers.

In the jungle, we had to go in pairs and I made friends with Mr. Fowlers and he became my partner in the walks. Five days after we arrived in the jungle. He contracted malaria. We didn't realise he had not been vaccinated. I had to stop going for my safari expeditions and I took care of him in the tent. He told me all about Canada, the provinces, the culture, the education and lots more.

Then he asked me, "Tell me about you." I didn't know anything about myself. I was shocked because in Africa people didn't ask questions. It wasn't normal that an adult would ask a young person that question. So I said I didn't have anything to talk about myself. He said you must have something to tell.

So I told him about my family. He asked why I wasn't in school and I told him I had to work and help. He really drilled me and over the ten days that I spent with him, I realised that I didn't know who I was.

Then I had to leave, the lorries were leaving Kenya and he had to be airlifted to be taken to the hospital. Before I left for South Africa, he said to me, "Would you like to come to Canada to finish your high school?" I said, "Thank you for the offer Sir but I don't have money to come to Canada, I'm too poor." He said, "If you start saving now, you will get to the end, where the bottle is full and you will afford it."



Four years later I bought a ticket to come to Canada. Fowlers was living in Saskatchewan and had made arrangements for me to go to school, he found some boarding with a family. When my flight got to Montreal, I had this little parcel from a girl who was teaching here from South Africa. She couldn't make it to the airport and sent a friend. I had 12 hours to wait for my flight and the friend asked to take me into town and show me around Montreal. When I went in, it was like going into Cape Town. The buildings and the sounds of the languages seemed familiar and I felt connected. I had values that my grandmother instilled in me, which I brought along to Canada, so I could easily fit. The only difference was that I spoke English and Afrikaans in South Africa and here in Montreal it's English and French.

I called my sponsor and asked if I could stay in Montreal. He said, "This is a free country where we practise democracy and I brought you to come to school. If you don't find a school, a job and a place to stay, I will come and get you and bring you to Saskatchewan where everything is waiting for you." There is a God above my head because I found everything in one week. The school that accepted me without any papers was Sir George Williams High School. I am proud to say that I am a graduate of Concordia University. Now, from factory to a graduation, that is progress. But I made a promise to my sponsor, Edwin Fowlers that I would go back to Africa and share my success with the people. That is what I promised and am trying my best to do that.



Testing Children for Aids at Kikuhe Orphanage in Tanzania.

**Q: What are you doing to fulfill that promise?**

There are 20 million children that have HIV/Aids in Africa and I decided I wanted to help by collecting medical supplies, clothing, food and taking it there directly. I have convinced Canadians that there is need and the Quebecers are the most generous people. I don't care about the world and far away people, I am talking about my neighbours, those in my environment, they have been supportive. I fight my way through the airports to different countries and I make sure that I am affiliated with a hospital in that particular country. I take the medical supplies in person because if you send it, it disappears

**Q: What was it like going back to South Africa after spending time in Canada?**

I went back for the first time ten years after I had arrived. When I was young, apartheid didn't have its teeth sunk into the people. But when I returned, I felt it and I suddenly couldn't do A,B,C and D. It was all preserved for whites only. I felt it more because I went back with my children. They wanted to do things that they could do in Montreal and yet they couldn't go everywhere and do everything. The psychology of apartheid hit them really hard. By the way, I married the man I met at the Montreal airport when I was waiting for the flight to Saskatchewan, which I never took.

**Q: What have the two countries contributed to the person that you have become?**

On a personal note, I am proud to take pieces back, I discovered my identity here in Canada, who I really am, through an education at Concordia University. I found out that I was Métis, which means simply mixed blooded. My background is Khoikhoi and European from French, Dutch and English. So I fell right into the culture in Montreal because Europeans came into Canada too just like in Africa and they did the same teachings in music, theatre and traditions, this is why Montreal is so much like where I come from in Cape Town.

I also found out that Afrikaans is a Khoikhoi language and not a white man's language. The Boers took it to polish it up but they never gave it back to the Khoikhoi who used it as a trading language. This is one of my researches that I did in Montreal. All in a quest to find out who I am. This is one of the things that I want to teach my people. Afrikaans was developed when the Khoikhoi tried to communicate with different settlers who came to trade. They would then speak German to the French and French to the Germans and with every other country that came by, they tried to communicate with whatever language they had picked up. Afrikaans has a mix of about ten languages. But the Boers have taken credit for the language and the Khoikhoi have never been recognised. So I want to take what I have learned back to my people in South Africa.



**Q: Do you feel that you have achieved all your dreams and have your expectations been met?**

A lot of expectations have been met. If I had not been in Canada, I am sure that I wouldn't have been able to fulfill my dreams in South Africa. I would have probably just moved a yard but now I have moved forward a thousand yards and more. I haven't achieved all I have ever wanted to do but most of my dreams came true.

I did find out how that movie got into the camera. After I graduated from university as a trained film and television director, my name was put into the National Film Board's bank. Then I got a call to be a second director in a Hollywood movie that needed someone with an Afrikaans background.

**Q: What are you hoping for the future?**

Looking to drill a well for the children affected by HIV/Aids. We have a group of people going to climb Mount Kilimanjaro while raising money for the medical supplies. I will make sure that my company, Zerf Productions will maintain it's mandate to develop projects linking Canada to other countries.

For More Info:

[www.zerfchallenge2020.com](http://www.zerfchallenge2020.com)



Dr. Fredericks with children in Tanzania



A girl gets tested for HIV/Aids





Helping build a school in Tanzania