

Actor Gerard Butler's aid helps spread Love everywhere

When Hollywood actor Gerard Butler struck a friendship with Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow after presenting him with a CNN Heroes award back in 2010, creating a documentary together wasn't on the radar for either of them.

MacFarlane-Barrow, founder and CEO of [Mary's Meals](#), a charity that each day feeds more than 1.6 million school children living in poverty across the world, says true to the essence of the organization's origins, the connection with Butler and the making of their new documentary, [Love Reaches Everywhere](#), was an act of divine providence.

"I was still accepting the award and walking backstage with him when he started saying, 'This is really funny because my mother in Scotland's been talking to me for years about Mary's Meals and about you and saying that I should meet you and help you,' " said MacFarlane-Barrow, who like the actor hails from Scotland. "He joked, 'I need to get a selfie with you to send my mom.' "

Admittedly a "fish out of water" in Hollywood on that day, the organic friendship that unfolded between the two led to the making of *Love Reaches Everywhere* that was shot before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Butler contacted MacFarlane-Barrow and asked to accompany him on a trip to one of the communities the organization supports. They travelled to Liberia and later Haiti, brought a camera along and captured the actor preparing meals, teaching classes, planting in the gardens and interacting with the communities. The footage is the basis of the 30-minute documentary that premiered online on June 25.

"We do this work in the name of Our Lady and our values are unashamedly shaped by Catholic social teaching," said MacFarlane-Barrow, who founded Mary's Meals in 2002 after a visit to Malawi during a famine.

"We believe that if we keep getting that right then everything else takes care of itself. Meeting Gerry and creating this film is a great example of that."

With feeding programs in 19 countries, including Uganda, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Syria, Thailand and Romania, the film highlights Mary's Meals' mission to be a locally-run solution that thrives on empowering communities toward self-sustainability.

By providing meals the organization enables more families to send their children to school which creates a ripple effect of empowerment, encouraging schools to build their own farms and grow their own crops. MacFarlane-Barrow hopes this will one day lead to Mary's Meals becoming obsolete.

"The hope is that we will enable a new generation to be the ones that can solve the problems that their countries and their communities face across a whole range of things," he said.

"Whether that's improving agriculture, holding their governments to account or creating a different kind of economy through entrepreneurship, all the things required for a nation to develop can only be real if at least children are healthy and educated. We chose to start there. If we get that right, then those other things can happen."

Sheri McConnell, executive director of Mary's Meals Canada, joined the organization around the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Like MacFarlane-Barrow, she sees her role as "a calling" and says the support of Canadians through donations of finances, time, skill and prayer offerings has enabled the organization to continue feeding hungry children.

"We haven't had a huge hit from a financial perspective," said McConnell of the pandemic's effect.

"I find that Canadians out of that heart and spirit of generosity understand that COVID-19 doesn't just affect Canada, it affects the world. They realize that their neighbour is not just their next-door neighbour, it might be that child in Malawi, Kenya, Zambia, where our Canadian projects are."

Locally-run infrastructure has enabled the program to effectively continue feeding virtually all the children registered in the program even with schools closed due to COVID-19.

Mary's Meals has been working with government authorities and local communities to take the food to schools as normal and have parents and community leaders collect the food for home cooking with social distancing and other health guidelines in place.

"It kind of feels like a miracle to me to be honest," said MacFarlane-Barrow. "I never thought we would be able to do that at the outset of this new situation. It just speaks volumes for that local ownership because it was the local leaders who came up with the solutions to this."