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Review of Searching for Hawa's Secret

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This video introduces the research of Frank Plummer, a Canadian microbiologist and AIDS researcher who has worked in and around Nairobi, Kenya since 1981. During the course of his early work on STDs, he was introduced to Hawa Chelangat, a prostitute and mother of five who had remained HIV negative over several years despite frequent sexual encounters without condoms in an environment with a high HIV contagion rate. The video presents the hard facts of rampant HIV infection in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 70% of worldwide HIV+ status exists, and is, not surprisingly, devastating the population of young women and mothers like Hawa. Poverty and a lack of education often leaves urban women like Hawa few options but commercial sex work to support their families.

The video presents a discussion of both the scientific background of Plummer's research as well as the human story of the researcher's and his subject's daily lives in the middle of a public health disaster. Hawa, and a small percentage of the Nairobi commercial sex workers whom Plummer treats in his clinic, seem to remain free of the virus while their clients and women around them become infected. Plummer's research has revealed that Hawa and the few women like her possess a rare form of HLA molecules in their blood cells. This rare form of a common component of the immune system may help in the development of a vaccine without using the HIV virus. Traditionally, vaccines employ the pathogen introduced into the body to stimulate resistance, but a vaccine developed from attributes of Hawa's blood would avoid introducing HIV to the individual.

Searching for Hawa's Secret performs multiple tasks in its presentation, discussing the day to day life of women and community health efforts in a large Kenyan city, as well as the integration of Canadian research efforts and the struggle to stay afloat in an under-funded branch of medical research. Through watching this video one gains an appreciation of the AIDS epidemic as it impacts Africa, and the gap in funds and research between North America and the African continent. While the realities of grant proposals and inequitable allocation of public funds set a somber tone for the goals of Plummer's research team, ultimately this video presents a hopeful attitude toward the team's successes and future development. It presents a clear and balanced picture of the science involved that can be understood by audiences in high school or above. The human drama of poverty, disease and prostitution are dealt with frankly and without sensationalism so that viewers get a realistic sense of life in contemporary Nairobi. Searching for Hawa's Secret has high quality production values and is presented with narration and interview in English and African Dialects with English subtitles. This video is recommended as a curriculum tool for public Health, African Studies, AIDS Education, or any Cross-Cultural Studies. (Guest reviewer, Steve Brantley, Resident Librarian, University of Illinois at Chicago Library).

Three other related films available from First Run Icarus Films are: The Heart of the Matter, by Gini Reticker, Amber Hollibaugh (A video that focuses on the story of Janice Jirau, an HIV-positive African American woman as she unravels the pieces of her life that contributed to her risk for HIV); Travis, by Richard Kotuk (A video about a remarkable young boy living with AIDS); and Paul Monette: The Brink of Summer's End, by Monte Bramer, Lesli Klainberg (A video about the life of Paul Monette).