



The Three Amigos, an animated PSA for greater good on a global scale.

Drawing Lessons

Firdaus Kharas used talking condoms to shift global attitudes about HIV/AIDS and saved millions of lives in the process BY MIKE LEVIN

As the AIDS epidemic swept across South Africa 15 years ago Firdaus Kharas was distraught. The burly, bearded Canadian filmmaker, then 49, believed many deaths could have been prevented if people had just been taught about safe sex. “It was the biggest communications failure in history,” he says, sitting in his Ottawa office, “and it was costing millions of lives.”

Kharas had already produced a short TV documentary called *The Circle Is Complete* on the devastating effects of the pandemic. The film was well-received, but gnawing at him was the feeling he was working on too small a scale. Kharas grew up in 1960s Calcutta, India, in a middle-class Parsi family with a strong sense of social responsibility. He remembers being an eight-year-old and clinging tightly to his

mother as they pushed past a huge, eight-paned wooden door into the Home for the Dying, a free hospice run by an Albanian nun named Mother Teresa. “There were rows and rows of beds full of people who couldn’t afford a hospital,” Kharas says. “So I had this early lesson that good deeds should extend far outside one’s own comfort zone.”

During his high school years in Mumbai he and a schoolmate went

Desmond Tutu praised Kharas’ PSAs as “a powerful communicating tool.”

down to the slums every Saturday and taught anyone who showed up whatever it was they were learning in class at that time. He left India at 17 for university in the United States and then moved to Ottawa—where he is still based—to study international affairs at Carleton University. That led to work in the Department of Employment and Immigration and at the Immigration and Refugee Board. Kharas saw up close the painful reality of refugees, but he realized he didn’t belong in Canada’s public service. “Government actions can save lives,” he says. “But I never really was a bureaucrat.”

If he was going to help the world’s disenfranchised, Kharas knew it would have to be through

the media. “I figured television was the best way to influence people,” he says. So in 1995 he founded Chocolate Moose Media in Ottawa, setting up production facilities in Singapore and Malaysia where the content business was booming. Kharas envisioned Chocolate Moose as a media company that would use for-profit activities (soap operas, feature films) to fund non-profit campaigns against—in the words of his website—“stereotypes and stigmas; racism and prejudices.” Kharas dubbed his hybrid business model “behaviour-change communications.” At the time, the behaviour he was most

intent on changing was the developing world’s apathy towards condoms.

In 2002 Kharas found an ally in Brent Quinn, a Johannesburg-based producer whom he had met at a conference in South Africa. Quinn, who also works as a comedian, thought that the people in his country most affected by AIDS—youths 15 to 24—had become deaf to moralistic messaging tactics. The situation was serious; South Africa had the fastest-growing AIDS rate in the world, with one in nine citizens infected. A new approach was desperately needed. So Quinn turned to an unlikely place for inspiration: children’s animation. He wondered if Kharas would be interested in producing public service announce-



Since 2004 Firdaus Kharas has produced 2,395 episodes in 90 languages.

ments (PSAs)—short, low-cost, ready-to-air messages given away to radio and television stations—that featured cartoon prophylactics.

Kharas grasped the possibilities immediately. “You can use animation in ways you can’t use real-life images,” he says, explaining that PSAs with real condoms have been yanked off the air in many countries. Moreover, cartoons can be easier to translate into a variety of languages, so their message can travel. “I knew I could use this for-

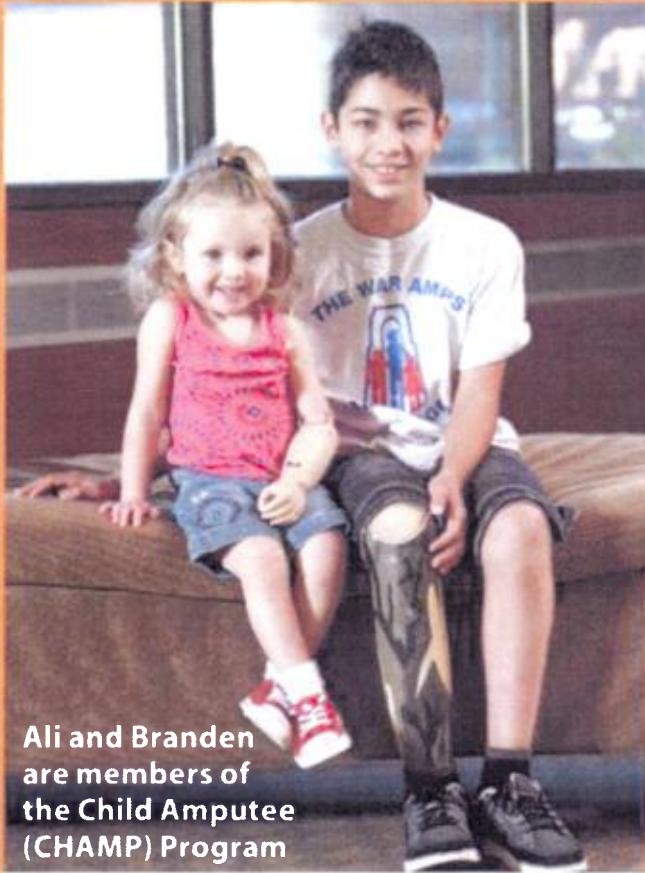
mat to mount a global campaign,” he says.

Kharas and Quinn ended up creating three talking condoms named Stretch, Shaft and Dick. The randy, rubbery friends appear in skits filled with sexual puns and visual innuendo. Whatever the setup—playing soccer, gambling in a casino or boarding a plane—the lesson the trio learns is the same: You can’t score, win or take off without protection. Twenty episodes of *The Three Amigos*—which vary between 15, 30, and 60 seconds in length—were fleshed out by an international team of 80 volunteers in Canada, India and South Africa. When the series debuted in South Africa in 2003 it caused a sensation. Within the year, pharmacies across

the country reported that customers were referring to condoms as “amigos.” The series, which was launched abroad at Bangkok’s XV International AIDS Conference in 2004, also earned the advocacy of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who praised the PSAs as “a powerful communicating tool.”

The amigos caught the attention of the United Nations, who arranged in 2005 to have the episodes translated into its six official languages—a number Kharas deemed

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insufficient. "It was never going to be enough to reach the worst-hit places," says Kharas, who always grasped the international potential of what he and Quinn had created. So he mobilized a team of volunteers across Canada to scout the streets for people willing to do

Kharas has tackled child labour, gender inequality and human rights.

voice-overs in every language from Mandarin to Lithuanian. "We'd get into a cab in Toronto," recalls his voicing coordinator Caitlin Delaney, "and ask the driver what language he spoke. If it was one we needed, we'd ask, 'Do you want to do this?'"

By 2011 *The Three Amigos* was available in 45 languages. (It's currently being translated into Slovenian.) Kharas spent more than \$100,000 of his own money on the project. This included producing thousands of DVDs, which, with the help of his wife and his assistant, he personally mailed to broadcasters around the world. Today the PSAs have been aired in approximately 150 countries. The Three Amigos site has also received about two million hits since launching seven years ago. And according to Kharas, the only condoms ever to be televised in Iran are Stretch, Shaft and Dick.

The Three Amigos won a 2006 George Foster Peabody Award, one of dozens of international awards Kharas has received for his achievements in combining social innovation and mass media. Population Services International (PSI), a non-profit that promotes health in the developing world, credits *The Three Amigos* with helping increase its free distribution of male and female condoms from 12 million in 2004 to 40 million in 2005. According to UNAIDS, from 2001 to 2009, condom use rose by as much as 45 percent—comprising 25 billion units—in areas of Africa and Asia hit hardest by the disease. Moreover, diagnoses of new AIDS cases began dropping dramatically after 2004—

by ten to 20 percent annually—when Kharas’s PSAs began airing.

Following the success of *The Three Amigos*, Kharas used cartoons to help combat another misunderstood epidemic: malaria. With the disease claiming 655,000 lives a year worldwide, most of them children’s, organizations still struggle to educate local populations that infection is caused by mosquito-transmitted parasites. Called *Buzz and Bite*, Kharas’s series stars a pair of vampish female insects—they describe humans as “first-class dining”—whose blood lust highlights the importance of using bed nets. Thanks to a \$25,000 donation from the Canadian Red

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 But I can feel dry
 EVERY DAY ^{of the} MONTH

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 Always supports girl talent, including photographer Amanda Pratt and illustrator Laura Serra. © 2012 P&G

Cross, the 30 spots premiered in 2008 and are currently broadcast worldwide in 40 languages. The series has been embraced by NGOs, hospitals and schools eager for educational materials to help fight a preventable disease that threatens more than 40 percent of the world.

Kharas's biggest gamble yet, *No Excuses*, was launched last April.

Kharas constantly searches for better ways to speak across cultures.

The filmmaker was moved by the story of a one-month-old Bangladeshi boy whose aunt had thrown acid at him during a family dispute, disfiguring him horribly. "How do you begin to reach people who see that behaviour as normal?" he asked himself. The answer was an 11-episode series, translated into more than 70 languages, that uses a cast of blue-skinned characters to address domestic violence on a variety of fronts. The problem, Kharas explains, is complicated by the fact that definitions of violence against women and children vary from culture to culture, with religion or tradition often being used as an excuse.

"We talked to child-rights activists, torture victims and academics to get the messages right and make them compelling in a universal sense," says Kharas. His solution

was to script the 30-second episodes around the persecutor, using dark humour to challenge their justifications, something he says "has never been done before." The results are jarring. "Do you promise to beat your wife and abuse her in sickness and in health?" asks the pastor in the opening of an episode on spousal abuse. Another spot, which focuses on sexual assault by soldiers, has new recruits answering the question of why they signed up with a cheerful "To rape, sir!"

Canadian film producer Micheline Shoebriidge has known Kharas, a family friend, since her teens and is currently finishing up a documentary about him. She describes him as "an irresistible force" constantly searching for better ways to solve the creative challenge of speaking across cultures. "His team will be calling in from Africa or Dubai at all hours, he directs meetings in other places in a mind-boggling number of languages and he's always in complete control."

"I conduct cultural experiments around issues plagued by silence," says Kharas. In recent years, he has crafted animated series tackling child labour, gender inequality and human rights. On any given day, his work might reach over 80 percent of the world's population in their own languages. "I couldn't stop doing this even if I wanted to," he says. "Basically, I'm an optimist." ■