

## MASIBUMBANE HIV/AIDS MISSION

Janet van Eeden.

The hills are covered with little crosses. Occasionally an ostentatious tombstone makes its presence felt amongst the wooden markers, but the poverty of the living impinges more frequently on the remembrances of the dead. A veld fire has recently ravaged the hills and many of the once white crosses are now black stumps. Near us two sets of people are digging fresh graves. It's just another Tuesday morning in Mpophomeni.

My host, Solveig Otte, tells me that AIDS is continuing to ravage the community. Sometimes there are as many as eight funerals taking place on one day. The 80% percent unemployment rate hasn't helped either. It is no surprise to see the funeral tents stretched out across a street being scrubbed own with a hose and broom. These are in constant demand. The only people thriving in this community are the funeral service providers.

Otte takes me to a small house in the middle of the town. The house stands amongst its neighbours well disguised. Only those in the know can tell that it's providing a life line to people in the community affected by Hiv-AIDS. A bright faced young man comes out to welcome us. He is, Mduduzi Zwane, the team leader of Masibumbane Mission, an organisation founded by Dr Rob Kluge eight years ago.

'Our Misson helps people affected by HIV in the community,' Zwane tells me later. 'We encourage people to know their Hiv-status so that they can receive help from us. We have ten projects currently underway and all of them are designed to meet the needs of our clients. I am personally responsible for two projects. One is the Social Grant Support project. I assist clients to obtain their birth certificates and ID books from Home Affairs and show them how to apply for the grants they are entitled to, and even help them get their pensions when they are due. I am also responsible for the Discipleship project, which assists people with their spiritual growth.'

Another member of the team is Sindi Makhathini. She is an AIDS counsellor who also teaches women to crochet bags and place mats which are sold to generate income for themselves as part of the Mawube Nathi project]. 'To encourage people to get tested, we provide help only when we have proof of their Hiv-status,' she says. 'Once they have admitted they are ill, then we can support them and help them get better. We help them obtain medication, and also provide food until we can get them involved in a project which helps them earn their own money when they are well enough.'

Happy Khumalo is the Youth Counsellor. She helps scholars affected by AIDS with their homework and with any problems they may encounter at school. 'One child ran away from school when he found out his parent was sick,' she says. 'But with the help of the teachers we managed to get him to come back.' Khumalo, along with school girls from St Anne's who volunteer

every Tuesday, spends afternoons in the new library helping scholars with their studies.

Nicholas Ngubane is the Financial Instructor whose job it is to help people use their grants or pensions wisely. 'I show people how to make a budget and to draw up a business plans for the small businesses as they develop,' he explains. He is also working with the poultry section at Cedara Agricultural College to establish a home-based rearing project with Zulu chickens.

The field worker, Robert Zuma, was out working in the homestead gardens which he supervises. His job is to train people to grow organic vegetables using a system designed by Bruce Taylor of Walk in the Light Ministries. One row of five different types of vegetables are planted each week to generate enough produce to feed the gardener's family and sell possible excess.

Kluge explains how he felt challenged in 1998 to do something about the AIDS crisis. 'I am a member of the Hilton Methodist Church, and I felt like the priest and the student of the Law in the story of the Good Samaritan,' he explains. 'Each of them was aware of the dire need of the man next to the road, but chose to pass by on the other side. I asked God to show me what I could do even though, as an entomologist, I did not seem to be equipped for the situation. I started going to Mpophomeni to pray for those who were sick. But soon I realised that wasn't enough.'

Kluge joined forces with Solveig Otte and Anne Kluge who started the crocheting project.

'People were also expressing their fears of dying. A special person in the church, who had grown up among Zulu people, joined the team to offer spiritual support. Just as the lack of funding was becoming a problem, a brother in the church handed me a cheque and said his company had committed itself to give the Mission R500 a month. That was confirmation for me. Then the Atonement Lutheran Congregation in Missoula, Montana offered to become a partner.

'Masibumbane is not a handout agency and rather seeks to be an empowerment agency,' Kluge says. 'Reciprocal effort, however small, is expected from clients "to earn" whatever they receive to begin to foster the ultimate goal of self-reliance. It is also a member of CINDI and PACSA and works with other agencies such as Howick Hospice and Mngeni Aids.

Kluge explains the model they use. 'After families are taken on, they progress through four stages. First is a stabilisation phase where they receive emergency provisions of basic needs such as food, clothing and bedding. Second is the initial rebuilding phase where families are visited on a weekly basis. They are assisted with schooling if necessary and are taught to crochet and to grow vegetables. They do not generate an income and are likely to be dependent on the mission for weekly food rations. Third is the advanced rebuilding phase where families still receive a weekly visit but begin to

practise their newly acquired skills of crocheting and vegetable gardening to generate an income. They receive cash for work and are able to purchase food themselves. The final phase is the maintenance phase where families receive a monthly visit and they are no longer dependent on the Mission for material needs.'

Kluge relates how the Mawube Nathi crocheting project is now becoming a sustainable business. The produced handbags are sold as far a field as America. The project has assisted many families over the years to supplement their incomes. There have also been projects which benefit not only those affected by AIDS but the larger community too.

'The creches and the Qedindlala Community Garden originated from the needs of the families the Mission was involved with,' says Kluge. They are currently working with four crèches, Ekuthuleni Creche, Tholokhuhle Day Care Centre, Masibumbane Crèche and Siyaqoba Creche.'

I asked members of the Masibumbane team what the project means to them personally. 'I find that I like my job because I make a difference in children's lives and empower them to have a future,' says Happy Khumalo.

Financial Instructor Nicholas Ngubane keeps money in mind. 'I want to teach people to manage their finances so that they can survive,' he says.

Sindi Makhathini wants people to 'become more responsible for their lifestyles.'

The final word goes to team leader Mduduzi Zwane. 'I have grown so much, personally, emotionally and spiritually,' he says. 'I get so much more than I give.'

Masibumbane survives purely on donations and with the help of dedicated volunteers. If you would like to help in any way contact

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Web: [www.masibumbane.org.za](http://www.masibumbane.org.za) (due on line in July)