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INSIDE STORY

BEFORE Woza Moya started, people were dying of Aids but we didn't know it was Aids," says Jane Ngethembi Nxasane. "We thought people were bewitched by something. At the beginning it was difficult for us to accept HIV, but now it is accepted."

Nxasane is a founder member of Woza Moya, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that provides care and support for people infected and affected by HIV/Aids in the Ofafa Valley, about 15 kilometres from Ixopo. The Woza Moya Community Centre where Nxasane works is situated just below the crest of a ridge and provides a spectacular view of the valley which is home to about 23 000 people, spread among 10 communities, each with an induna who in turn owes allegiance to inkosi Thokozile Ndlovu.

Woza Moya recently celebrated its 10th year of working with the people of Ofafa, to whom it offers a variety of services, including home-based care, orphan intervention, food security and paralegal services.

"Woza" means come and "moya" means wind, air, breath or spirit. "Christians would say Holy Spirit," says Woza Moya's director Sue Hedden. "I love the way it means wind and spirit at the same time."

The seed of Woza Moya can be found in Hedden's fluency in Zulu — "I used to teach Zulu at a high school." Back in the nineties when Hedden was running the kitchen at the nearby Buddhist Retreat Centre (BRC), her facility with the language saw staff members going to speak to her about their problems. "I ended up in a mediator role."

Hedden discovered that learning English was a priority among the staff so she set up a course, the content of which involved telling life stories. "The stories that emerged were just shocking," says Hedden.

"We Buddhists up on the hill were oblivious to what was going on around us. People were dying like flies as a result of HIV/Aids. But there was no information or knowledge about the disease."

The most recent statistics for the area, from 2003, indicate that the Ofafa community has been seriously affected by the Aids pandemic. In that year, 47% of the pregnant women tested at the antenatal clinic were HIV-positive. Of the general patients referred for voluntary counselling and testing in a five-month period in the same year, 78% tested positive.

Made aware of this tragedy playing out on her doorstep, Hedden consulted Kittisaro and Thanissara Weinberg, who were semi-resident teachers at the BRC who now run Dharmagiri, a Buddhist hermitage near Unnerberg — "they took it up immediately" — and all three approached Louis van Loon, founder of the BRC, and his wife, Chrsi, who helps run the centre, for their blessing in setting up an HIV/Aids initiative.

Hedden also sought advice from an old school friend, Debbie Mathew, executive director of the Aids Foundation of South Africa (Afsa), who had grown up on a farm in the area.

"She laid out clear procedures for us to follow," says Hedden. "Her advice was that whatever we did, it must not be top-down. We had to hear from the community, to let them identify their needs and then discover how best to respond."

Mathew also put Hedden in touch with the Siyaphila support group in Pietermaritzburg, which is a group of Zulu-speaking people living with Aids, where she met Jabu Molefe. She and Molefe first met informally with members of the Ofafa community and then a day-long meeting was held in a church hall.

"It was a hectic day," Hedden recalls. "There was shouting, people said Jabu was lying. How could she be so plump if she was HIV-positive? People were angry, there was a lot of animosity."

But as the issues were talked through, consensus was reached and 15 volunteers were chosen to take the project forward. "Two of those volunteers, Jane Ngethembi Nxasane and Benedicta Memela, came up to me afterwards and said 'we are with you'. They are now our two project managers."

Meanwhile, the Weinbergs set about raising funds and contacted friends at the San Francisco Insight Centre (SFI) who subsequently financed Woza Moya's first year of operation which was run from an office at the BRC. In 2005, thanks again to funding from SFI, Woza Moya moved to its own home on tribal land next to the village of Chibini at the head of the Ofafa Valley.

Ten years on, Woza Moya now has 48 staff. "They are not all full-time," says Hedden. "Many are part-time and some are volunteers. It's grown to be a huge operation." It's also one that has worked, attracting national and international attention in the process. If there is a secret to Woza Moya's success it is the combination of a practical, hands-on approach that avoids prescriptive solutions, and a more elusive personal touch. "We have found that the big campaigns with banners and handing out condoms are not effective," says Hedden. "It's the much more subtle things, the one-to-one interactions within a caring and confidential environment."

Woza Moya now fields 28 community care workers

HILL OF HOPE



The view of the Ofafa Valley from the Woza Moya Community Centre.

PHOTO: STEPHEN COAN

For a decade, Woza Moya has been providing care for people with HIV/Aids from its site high above Ixopo. STEPHEN COAN reports.



Woza Moya's director Sue Hedden (left), with project managers Benedicta Memela (centre) and Jane Ngethembi Nxasane.

PHOTO: STEPHEN COAN



Bancamisle Shabalala supervises exercise in the Woza Moya play school.

PHOTO: STEPHEN COAN

THE SCHOOL SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMME

WITH R1 000 a year, Woza Moya can purchase a school uniform for one child, including shoes, socks, underwear, tie, shirt and trousers or skirt, and cover some of the operational costs involved in running this programme.

The school sponsorship programme only accepts primary school children up to Grade 6.

There are seven primary schools in the Ofafa Valley and each one has a different school uniform.

If you would like to find out more, contact Woza Moya's special projects volunteer, Ian Chamber, via e-mail at ichamber@intekom.co.za (please put School Sponsorship Programme in the subject box).

Growing fly problem

I WONDER if other people in Pietermaritzburg have a similar problem. There seems to be a new breed of fly around. They are black with a green metallic sheen to them and are very persistent. We have been getting rid of our own rubbish and take it

SOME while ago I was drawn into a conversation with a young woman who was extolling the virtues of President Jacob Zuma. She told me that her church congregation loves him, so I asked what they thought of the corruption charges against him. "Oh, we don't judge," she replied, "because we are all sinners. You are a sinner too."

I was reminded of this when I read William Saunderson-Meyer's column (Witness, May 15) on Julius Malema's meaningless apology. He mentioned "the rituals of repentance and forgiveness that some Christian churches demand of their congregations". It is assumed that all are sinners. This brought me to the differing

opinions of Marigold Gilroy (Witness, May 12) and Heidi Steyn (Witness, May 14). The former wrote that we are all criminals and so should not complain, and the latter felt there is a huge difference between minor misdeeds and major criminal actions, and that we do have the right to voice our concern. The whole issue is problematic in

this country. Although I admit Pietermaritzburg residents have not been silent on the matter of the ANC's corruption and mishandling of the municipality, there are still many South Africans who, for whatever reason, feel they have no right to speak out. JOAN KERCHHOFF Pietermaritzburg

HAVE YOU LOST YOUR KITCHEN?

THIS advert appeared in the Lost and Found section of the classified ads on Monday (Witness, May 17):

"Female kitchen found near Clarendon School!" It probably felt neglected and

lonely and went on a walkabout. Strange things happen these days. PAM THOMPSON, Hilton

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