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Reservoirs of Joy

By: Susan Van Dongen , TIMEOFF

An exhibit at the Bernstein Gallery focuses on what can be done to help medically impoverished women in South Africa.

In post-Apartheid South Africa, the political unrest is gone, the military vehicles have vanished and the police no longer threaten impoverished black South Africans. But other problems have not been solved.

An estimated 750,000 people live in informal communities outside Cape Town, in less-than-adequate housing, including makeshift dwellings constructed of corrugated iron, wood and plastics. Many of the homes are overcrowded and without water and sanitation.

A lack of basic services, inadequate housing, widespread unemployment, concentrated poverty and high rates of HIV/AIDS have brought malnutrition and poor health to these communities; women and children are the most vulnerable. Twenty percent of the population in these areas is made up of children younger than 6. Without intervention, one in 10 will be underweight and one in four will not reach his or her full growth potential due to lack of nutrition.

This is where Philani, a community-based child health and nutrition organization, has stepped in. Philani, which roughly translated from Xhosa means "to get well, to live," is committed to the promotion of good child health and nutrition, the prevention of malnutrition and the rehabilitation of underweight children in a caring, supportive environment. It is also committed to limiting the suffering of families affected by HIV and preventing the spread of the virus through a comprehensive program of education, care, support and treatment.

Founded in 1979, Philani's vision is a South Africa where every child can grow up healthy and well nourished to fulfill his or her physical and mental potential. Since its inception, under founder and medical director Ingrid le Roux, Philani has been working to alleviate these problems, assisting thousands of pregnant women, mothers and children through a network of community outreach workers and nutrition centers.

Because a woman who is financially independent has a better chance of providing for her children, Philani also has made an income-generating arts and craft program an integral part of its goal to assist destitute families.

Improving Health in Poor Countries: What Works?, a photography exhibit at the Bernstein Gallery at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School Sept. 17 through Oct. 26, gives a glimpse of the work being done by Philani. In conjunction with the exhibit, there will be a panel discussion on health care interventions in developing countries Oct. 8. Panelists include Dr. le Roux and Woodrow Wilson School



A weaver whose work will be sold in the Philani gift shop in South Africa.

faculty Christina Paxson and Angus Deaton.

The photographs were taken by artist Joan Needham and Bernstein Gallery Curator Kate Somers. The two Princeton-area women traveled to South Africa in February to teach linoleum block printing to women from one community outside of Cape Town. Examples of these, as well as other crafts, also will be on view.

Ms. Somers and her husband had befriended two Woodrow Wilson visiting professors from Cape Town, both of whom are involved in social justice issues, Philani in particular, and became interested in the organization's work.

"I started to plan right after my first visit to South Africa with my husband in March of 2006," Ms. Somers says. "A couple of months later, after I mentioned my interest in trying to further develop Philani's art program, Joan said she wanted to join me. I was thrilled because as an artist, she had a real skill to teach the women."

In the photographs we see Philani workers coming to individual homes to give the women and children basic health services, like being weighed. There's a shot of a weaver whose work will be sold in Philani's craft shop, as well as the shop itself. Women participating in Philani's income-generating project are shown making linoleum block prints.

Based on her first trip to South Africa, Ms. Somers had a pretty clear picture of what life would be like living and working with the people in the community, but once there she saw that things were both worse and better than she imagined.

"It is safe to say that it would be hard to prepare for the immersion we had in the often chaotic lives of the women with whom we worked," she says. "But at the end of the day, the most striking thing for us was their appreciation, resilience and deep reservoirs of joy, often expressed through song, that they brought to whatever tasks were at hand. Their spontaneous singing was enough to lift the most heavy heart."

Even the most underemployed American would be troubled by the sheer lack of opportunities and poverty in the communities outside of Cape Town. The economic troubles really hit women and children.

"Children are vulnerable because of their total dependency and women are vulnerable because they bear children and while they raise them their ability to earn and support a family is limited," Dr. le Roux says. On a positive note, there are more and more opportunities for work, "especially for individuals with some education.

"The health care system is being expanded, there are more and better houses (but not at all enough), and more people have electricity and clean water," Dr. le Roux continues.

"Every rehabilitated and healthy child and every mother who through her own work is financially independent and in charge of her life are victories for us," Dr. le Roux says. "And there are quite a few of those."

Philani's development programs specifically target young women for education and skills, training to give them independence and power to make decisions about their own lives. Women without education and economic independence become especially vulnerable to sexual and other abuse and, with that, to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

"HIV and AIDS and its rapid spread in South Africa is certainly related to poverty," Dr. le Roux says. "Women without income have difficulty negotiating safe relationships. Young women coming to Cape Town from the rural areas without education or income, feel they need a boyfriend for protection and economic support. In Southern Africa there are three times more young women infected by HIV than men in the same age group. So, again, women are vulnerable and carry the brunt of the epidemic. As Carol Bellamy, former executive director of UNICEF, wrote, 'AIDS has a woman's face.'"

As with many of the photo exhibits at the Bernstein Gallery, *Improving Health in Poor Countries* gives Americans perspective on our somewhat spoiled lives. Ms. Somers speaks again and again of the appreciation and joy she witnessed among the people in the South African communities, even though they possessed next to nothing. Most of us probably can't fathom living like this.

"But more importantly for me is that this exhibition brings pride and hope to the women who produced the art, so that they will continue with this work and make money for their families," she says."

Improving Health in Poor Countries: What Works? Photography by Joan Needham and Kate Somers is on view at the Bernstein Gallery, the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Robertson Hall, Princeton University, Sept. 17-Oct. 26. Panel discussion in Bowl 16, adjacent to the

Bernstein Gallery, Oct. 8, 4:30 p.m. Also on view will be examples of the lino-block prints, weavings, rugs and handbags made by the women Ms. Needham and Ms. Somers worked with. Gallery hours: Mon.-Fri., 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (609) 258-2222. Philani on the Web: www.philani.org

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