

aid for AIDS victims

SUE HEDDEN is an English-speaking South African who has lived in KwaZulu-Natal most of her life. The former high-school teacher of Zulu was living at the Buddhist Retreat Centre, in Ixopo, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, when two employees died from the AIDS virus. She and the Centre's spiritual teachers, Kittisaro and Thanissara, found that young people in the neighboring Chibini community were "dying like flies." Funerals seven days a week meant there was no time and money for social gatherings. Sue – through the new Woza Moya Project – is now starting to help people to cope with the AIDS situation.

Jabu Molefe, left, and Sue Hedden. Jabu belongs to an HIV/AIDS support group called 'Siyaphila', meaning, 'we are well.' Jabu works with the Health Department and has been closely associated with (and supportive of) the Woza Moya Project from its beginnings. She will be doing the HIV/AIDS part of the training for the volunteers. Jabu is HIV+ herself and is part of a group known as FACE, which gives a face to the crises. They disclose their status publicly.



Photo: Alonanda

KwaZulu-Natal is the worst affected province in South Africa in terms of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Official figures put the infection rate at 30 per cent but many believe it to be closer to 40 per cent and progressing rapidly. Several hospitals are running at 120 per cent capacity because of AIDS. They are sending people home to die because they simply cannot accommodate them.

We realized that the level of awareness about HIV/AIDS was virtually non-existent when we heard that a sangoma (traditional healer) was saying white people were dropping bad medicine out of the sky [from the very occasional passing plane]



Photo: Sue Hedden

View of the Chibini valley as seen from the Buddhist Retreat Center.

and that was killing their young people.

I am now working full-time as coordinator for the Woza Moya Project whose name is derived from the Zulu words, Moya, which can mean "wind, air, breath, spirit or Holy Spirit" depending on context, and Woza, which means "come." We aim to train and equip a volunteer team to support its own community in home-based care, bereavement counseling and community fostering and care of orphans. Specialists in the fields of HIV/AIDS, primary health care, counseling and social services will be brought in to train them.

We are in the first stage of the program, concentrating our efforts in the Chibini area, which is typical of much of rural KwaZulu-Natal, in that there are no telecommunications, and no



Photo: Sue Hedden

The volunteer team at a workshop at the Buddhist Retreat Centre

electricity or running water. The main source of water is still the river. Most people live in traditional homes made of mud with thatch roofs. We use footpaths to reach people's homes. This all takes time and things often move along a lot slower than planned!

The Chibini community has chosen its own 14 volunteers. I had very little to do with the selection process, and simply asked people to choose people that the community trusts, who have basic reading and writing skills (in their mother tongue Zulu is fine) for training purposes, and who were willing to serve their community as volunteers. There were many meetings leading up to this final selection.

I have been deeply touched by the warmth and hospitality that I have received from people in the valley. Most of these families are living in extreme poverty and struggling with serious illnesses. The Dharma has taught me to embody the principles of loving-kindness, compassion and equanimity in my day-to-day work environment. This gives meaning and purpose to my work. The Dharma also teaches me to engage with suffering with an open and compassionate heart rather than turning away. When I engage with suffering mindfully as a part of my practice, a sense of fulfillment arises. ☸

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