

## The Story of Grace

The first time we met Grace Bawuelhano she was sweeping and polishing the floors at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Africa University, Zimbabwe. With a quick smile and slight curtsy, she welcomed us into the building and took us to meet our guide and contact, Violet Chikanya. The next day, Grace invited us to see some of the wall hangings she had made to support her family and son at the university. The hangings made of scraps of colorful discarded materials were composed of three-dimensional panels, each depicting the daily life of women in Zimbabwe. A note had been placed in a pocket of the bottom panel describing the activity of each panel.

In one hanging, women were portrayed making clay pots, then going to the river to fill the pots while carrying their babies on their backs. The next panel showed the women going to the fields to work still carrying their babies. The last panel showed women washing clothes and preparing food for dinner.

What the wall hangings do not show are the absent members of the family, most likely the husband and others in the family who have died from AIDS. No family has been left untouched by this pandemic in Southern Africa. Once infected persons seldom survive more than a year as other diseases such as TB, malaria and pneumonia attack their bodies. Those who do survive are often stigmatized by the community and frequently shunned by their families

The wall hangings do not show the husband leaving home to drive a truck or work in a factory in the city or in a mine in Johannesburg. They do not show the prostitutes who infect the husbands who then return home and pass the HIV virus on to the wife. The wall hangings do not show the orphans left to survive on their own or with the help of a grandmother or aunt.

When HIV/AIDS enters a family, it not only shames the family, but the entire support system of the family is decimated. It is primarily the women who raise the children, work in the small farm plots, care for the animals, gather the firewood, and cook the food mostly from scratch. They are the primary caregivers who hold the family together. In a way the wall hangings are a tribute to the women who play the central role in the family and now in the community as care-givers for those who have become infected with the virus. Our caravan met with a group of 96 volunteer care-givers, mostly women who take care of some 500 persons infected with HIV/AIDS. We asked them what motivates them to walk miles into the country to give assistance and support. One woman said, "patients were being neglected by their relatives and we want to care for them." Another said, "I felt for those suffering people and put myself in their shoes." Another said, "When I see them suffering and neglected in the community I put my heart on them and reach out to them because I care about them." Another person said "some people died because they could not travel to the clinic to obtain the drugs. When I learned this is what caregivers do, I wanted to be the one to deliver the drugs." Others mentioned they had relatives who had died from AIDS so they were moved to care for others who were infected."

Over and over, it was stories of women caring for each other through support groups, delivering first aid, and helping their communities to confront the problem of denial and stigmatization. Having witnessed this for ourselves in the rural communities of Zimbabwe, the wall hangings made by Grace became a powerful image of the positive life women are leading in rural communities. A major thrust of Project Tariro (Hope) is to support these dedicated caregivers and to deliver assistance to those living with HIV/AIDS so they may know how to live positively with hope.

Submitted by Paul VanBuren, Fall 2009

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