

## **Finding Hope in Swaziland**

By Amy Mayer (Swaziland 2006-2008)

Shortly after our arrival, we attended a local clinic meeting. Local is a term I use loosely as our “local” involved a 6 km walk down a dirt road. Or rather up it as a slight incline accompanied us the whole way. But as we left the house the crisp coolness of morning was still our friend as we walked and felt the sun rising behind us as it mastered the mountain ridge to our eastward facing backs. I had remembered to pack my water and some toilet tissue and knew that near the clinic the women were always selling fruits and things to snack on. I had already learned the dangers of stepping out of my door without taking these basic needs into consideration.

Once at the clinic we joined the group of 20 or so that were waiting. They were there to receive their monthly supply of ARV’s and they preferred to wait at the back of the clinic. This served not only the purpose of not being seen by the rest of the community but there was some shade to be had from a large tree and the shadow of the clinic building.

Resting in the shade my husband and I noticed that one of our new acquaintances was there in the crowd. He was also active in our local HIV/AIDS Support Group in our community. His first name oddly was the same as my husband’s; Jerome. As the hospital staff showed up shortly thereafter, not much of a meeting had taken place but we were happy just to have been seen and introduced to some of the people there waiting. We were preparing for our walk home when Jerome came to us to ask us to accompany him. As our Siswati was limited and his English not that much better we weren’t exactly sure where we were going. We finally figured out that he wanted us to go with him to visit a sick woman.

As we began walking the sun had almost reached its apex and I began to solidly resent its aggressive posturing. I felt the rivulets of sweat collect on my forehead before they started their downward plunge. I was unfamiliar with the footpath and was soon hopelessly lost except for the knowledge we were somewhere west of our new home. The grasses and thorn bushes became tall as we walked and the dirt which seemed to be ever drier was stirred up and began to darken my already shaded feet. After walking a good half hour we came to some lower lying land where you could make out that in previous years a water source must have been abundant. The grasses changed to the tall reedy kind which surrounds wetlands and the thorn bushes receded. No water was to be seen however, and this was my first glimpse into how much the recent “drought” or global changes were impacting the area of my new home in sub-Saharan Africa. Finally as we worked our way deeper I saw a muddy pool with wood boards along the side. This is where they had dug and placed a bottomless drum to hold back the dirt in search of water. The muddy dregs at the bottom were the only reward.

We passed by and soon came to a homestead. I could tell right away that it was that of a very poor family (even by that part of Swaziland’s standards) because of the lack of any concrete structures. All were of the traditional beehive or mud buildings. As we entered our guide Jerome shouted “ekhaya!” (household!) repeatedly. Our only response was from some small boys playing in what remained of a stick structure. Our companion inquired from them who was home and the eldest began to lead us

towards one of the mud structures further into the homestead. As we walked I noticed some kittens playing in the dirt. Their liveliness revealed their youth also evident in their still soft coats and hopeful movements.

Upon reaching the structure we found an elderly man coming to see us from within. Jerome conversed with him and shortly we were invited inside. As I bent to enter the low doorway I was momentarily blinded by the darkness inside. The mud floor had a slight slope which disoriented me without my full sight. The raw smell hit me as my eyes adjusted and my mind tried to identify it. A metallic rot which I had not smelled before but I would become acquainted with over the next couple of years. On that first encounter, I made the mistake of identifying that smell as the smell of death. Later after I had encountered it more and more, I would change my mind. It was not the smell of impending death, but rather the smell of sickness without hope. As the room came into focus I saw the reason for our visit take shape. The frame of what was a young woman lay along the wall on a thin mat on the floor.

We were invited to sit next to her on a straw mat which the young boy fetched for us. As we sat on the inclined floor the man spoke to Jerome and told him that the woman's sister was coming and had only just left to fetch some water. Where she found it, I'm not sure but she soon returned with a water container carried on her head and sweat dripping down her face. She appeared to be middle-aged, older than her ill sister. She seemed exhausted and flustered to find us there. Jerome explained who we were and in his broken English explained on behalf of the sister that the sick woman had only been recently tested for HIV and was found to be positive, but also had TB. At this point we were handed her medical notes as though we knew what should be done. Further questions revealed that they wanted to take her back to the hospital to have them put her on ARV's. The doctors would often require that medication for TB be completed before ARV's be started as TB tended to be the prevailing problem that prompted people to seek help in the first place. The woman was so ill at this point that she would not be able to travel by bus and would need a private car or taxi in order to go anywhere.

This proved to be one of our first encounters with the conundrum that is often Peace Corps. We wanted to be able to help but had been advised early in our training that helping people through monetary means is a slippery slope. We didn't want our roles to be defined by handouts which would in the end prove fruitless. We inquired of the sister how much money would be needed in order to get her to the hospital. Through Jerome we discovered that for about the equivalent of 14 USD they could take her. We gave the sister this amount and asked her to promise she would use it to take the sick woman for help. She was very appreciative and told us through Jerome that without our help she was at such a loss. Prior to our arrival she was contemplating leaving her sister, stopping caring for her to let her die. Those were her choices, let her sister die, or extend herself beyond any means she had. Her level of survival was already at a precarious level before she had the added burden of her sister's illness. I remember then being shocked at how she admitted this plan to abandon her own sister. Later in my service I would reconcile in my mind the choices for what they were and continue to be for so many people; barely surviving means making hard choices.

A couple of weeks later we met Jerome out in our community. We inquired about the sick woman, hopeful that she had made it to the hospital. He reported she had died. It had been too late for her.

Later in my Peace Corps service I remembered that person who visited that sick woman and see now that like those kittens hope and energy flowed through her. However, time doesn't stand still and I know that in this harsh place those kittens have since died. With time all things change, choices are required, and hope needs to be found; again and again and again.