

THE UNDERSTATED PROBLEM STATEMENT

Guyana, one of the smallest countries in the Caribbean with a population of approximately 750,000, has a very high incidence of HIV and AIDS.

Comforting Hearts NGO of New Amsterdam, Berbice, in partnership with Peace Corps Guyana and the Ministry of Education joined forces to address some of the needs of local women living with HIV. Together a proposal was drafted for a Peace Corps VAST (Volunteer Activities, Support and Training Program) Grant. The "Problem Statement" for the project was easily identified.

"Comforting Hearts NGO has been working with people living with HIV (PLHIV) and their children since its establishment in 1998....We have found that many PLHIV are unemployed mainly as a result of frequent illnesses and also little or no academic qualifications...Previous attempts to provide PLHIV with skills training failed because many PLHIV do not possess the necessary literacy skills to understand and follow the course curriculum."

Once the grant was awarded, the "Problem Statement" became less of an academic theory and more of a personal battle. The clients of Comforting Hearts NGO identified to participate in the project were the men and women struggling daily with not only the physical symptoms, but also the social stigma and discrimination of being labeled as having HIV or AIDS. They have the additional challenge of decreased reading, writing and comprehension skills and limited work experience. To remedy this continual problem, a series of literacy classes was developed to increase their comprehension levels, sewing and craft classes were inaugurated to provide an opportunity to augment family incomes, and management and computer classes were implemented for those with a desire to pursue their business skills. With funding from the grant, support from the Comforting Hearts' board, the organization, "Food for the Poor" and community in-kind gifts, sewing machines, computers, craft and sewing supplies were purchased for the first group of PLHIV students. The services of a volunteer literacy trainer from the Ministry of Education provided the invaluable instructional component of the program.

The Problem Statement became that much more personal when the first classes began in January, 2009. Judy and her friend Sharon are two of the students enrolled in these literacy and capacity building courses. Judy is 29-years-old and pregnant with her 5th child (ages 6, 5, 2, and 1). She jokes with the facilitator that she's "closing shop" after this birth. Her friend, Sharon's eyes have been damaged from a prior "home remedy" of packing her infected eyes with mud for 3 days; her corneas now are so scratched she can only make out shapes. Both women (PLHIV) attend the literacy and sewing classes twice a week and bring the army of little girls with them.

On the first day of literacy class it became clear that there needed to be two separate levels of participants. Those who functioned at a lower comprehension level were assigned to a newly formed class. The others remained in the high level class. The instructor for the beginners was provided by the Ministry of Education and has offered her services with these students over the course of the next year free of charge. Judy and Sharon were assigned to this class.

It's week 3 and Judy now can write her name and identify letters of the alphabet and corresponding sounds. Sharon is building confidence in her ability to participate in class without sight. As an added bonus, the older girls are learning along with their mother, and help her sound out the letters in words.

The twelve week sewing class has begun, with natural challenges such as seeing the numbers on the measuring tape ("first knuckle is one inch, second knuckle is two"), and sewing a straight stitch with a sewing machine ("feel the edge of the fabric as you draw it through the feeder"). At the end of the course, students will have the ability to create their own patterns, sew school uniforms for their children and produce items to sell in the local market.

Weekly get-togethers between Comforting Hearts' caregivers and students are generating crocheted mats, knitted caps, tie dyed shirts and hand-painted pillows. All will be used in the students' homes, given to friends and family, or sold in the village market and local churches. Computer and business management classes follow, giving the necessary tools to the students to keep this project alive. The money generated from the product sales will subsidize the families' income as well as support the program for future students.

The weeks surge forward and attendance levels ebb and flow. Both Sharon and Judy, with personal problems seemingly insurmountable for others, attend each and every class. The smiles they bring with them are contagious and at the end of every class those problems become just a little bit smaller for all of us.