

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

Volume One - Number Nine - November 2001

Art and the Aids pandemic

A project run by ML Sultan Technikon is concerned with a relationship between rural arts and HIV/Aids education in KwaZulu-Natal. **Charmaine Pretorius** writes about the programme run by design lecturer Kate Wells.

The spread of HIV/Aids in KwaZulu-Natal is continuing at an alarming rate despite expensive government information campaigns to try and curb the disease in one of the worst affected areas in the world.

Estimates are that close to five million South Africans are infected with the deadly disease and KwaZulu-Natal is cited as the province with the highest prevalence. The infection rate in KwaZulu-Natal increased from 32.5 percent in 1999 to 36.2 percent in 2000, according to a government study, which surveyed pregnant women attending public antenatal clinics.

And it is increasing, says Kate Wells, a lecturer in design studies at Durban's ML Sultan Technikon. Wells' rural craft and HIV/Aids awareness project has drawn international attention and funding. Called Siyazama, the project is a unique initiative that attempts to assist especially rural communities to face the reality of the sweeping Aids epidemic in southern Africa.

Siyazama, which means 'we are trying to make a positive difference', entails the use of traditional art including beadwork, doll making, soft beaded sculpture and telephone wire weaving.

Rural women use the art to convey the concerns and fears of women and to issue strong warnings about the impact of Aids and its causes. Beads and beadwork among Zulus, in particular, are tools to make socio-political statements. The beaded dolls are a visual record of experiences, influences and aspirations.

The craft and Aids project enables Zulu women to use their art to convey HIV/Aids messages and to openly discuss sex.

Wells holds up a soft beaded sculpture that forms part of the Siyazama exhibition at the technikon. It explicitly portrays the sexual act. "This should be in a museum. It is the only one of its kind in South Africa. This is where it all begins," she says, emphasising that open discussions on sexual matters in the communities these women come from are taboo.

But they have started discussing the scourge that has already claimed thousands in lives and this,

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Wells says, is where the success of the project lies.

She says the women have shown tremendous growth since they first started. This is evident as their art becomes more open, expresses more concern and emotion and conveys stronger messages.

Wells describes the project as "a beyond awareness Aids project in which communication and design education transfer HIV/Aids awareness into rural KwaZulu-Natal, fusing alliances with cultural affirmation, indigenous knowledge systems, product design, innovation, development and importantly, economic empowerment".

The Siyazama project has involved about 100 rural crafts women, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate design students, health workers, doctors, traditional healers, people living with HIV/Aids, medical anthropologists, performers, musicians and marketing outlets.

Wells feels that current HIV/Aids campaigns in South Africa tend to be large scale and evasive with little long-term impact on behavioural change. Elaborate and costly HIV/Aids campaigns such as the government-sponsored Love Life "was a waste of money", according to Wells, because people did not understand its messages.

But how then do we get the message across?

Wells believes that the most effective way is to start inside the homes of the most vulnerable and to use tools they can relate to - such as art.

She has been involved in the Rural Craft and HIV/Aids Awareness project since 1999 and believes it has been a huge success because it takes into consideration important culture aspects such as Zulu cosmology, including certain taboos and myths.

"This project is unique in the world," says Wells. "It is based on a whole different methodology. It allows people to align themselves with their culture."

Wells earlier this year received her MA degree in design from the Middlesex University in London. Her thesis explores the background to the current and future scenario of this rural craft programme, which was based on a number of years of on-going involvement with rural women.

Last year her work with rural women saw Wells become a finalist in the Checkers/SABC Women of the Year competition in the education category.

The dynamic blonde speaks proudly of the work she has done with rural women, and rightly so because the project has taken HIV/Aids awareness into homes in deep rural areas - including many areas only accessible on foot.

Wells says that since 1999 she has worked with large numbers of women coming from rural areas across the province including the Valley of a Thousand Hills, the Inanda Valley, Msinga, Ndwedwe and the Siyanda informal settlement.

The Siyazama Project seeks to promote the pivotal role of design through recognition of indigenous knowledge and skills as a means to disseminate vital information on HIV/Aids amongst

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the most marginalised and vulnerable of women in South Africa - rural women.

These women are highly susceptible to HIV infection because of gender imbalances and gender dynamics.

Living in a patriarchal society, a lot of their culture counts against them. They are ancestral worshippers and many live in polygamous set-ups. Even their burial practices can contribute to the spread of HIV/Aids.

But because of their ability to make art and contribute financially to their families, these women have earned a degree of role model status and have become opinion makers who are able to spread the Aids message in their homes and communities.

Many of these women enjoy little or no access to most forms of mass media and information in their rural homes. The majority of the craftswomen entering the initial workshops hear of Aids and its complexities for the first time, other than via rumour, Wells says.

"These women are attempting to project a notion of acceptable behaviour to their partners and children whilst working on the crafts in their rural homes. Whilst the intervention has clearly evidenced that design innovation can contribute to the social and economic upliftment of rural craftspeople, more importantly this project argues that design can play a significant role in communicating and transferring social, cultural and health messages into rural areas," says Wells.

Through their artwork the women have managed to stimulate open talk in their communities about HIV/Aids and sexual practices. "They can now explain to their children what the disease is and how to prevent it. In many cases they have even convinced their husbands to use condoms."

Wells' research has shown that despite the many campaigns around the issue, rural men generally still do not want to use condoms. "They carry them in their back pockets, but they do not use them."

As part of the project, Wells has facilitated a number of workshops for the women, including discussions with medical doctors, traditional healers and sangomas to address the role of traditional medical practices in fighting HIV/Aids.

Women also receive counselling on how to deal with the sick and dying with the assistance of the National Association of People Living with Aids.

Wells says she believes the best way to start sensitising people to the grave HIV/Aids situation in the country was to start in their homes.

The project was initially funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and administered by the British Council in Durban. It has recently linked with a new British Council funded programme collaborating with the University of Strathclyde, Scotland and the University of Malawi.

The project's craft collection, which is purchased from the women, is scheduled for exhibition in three venues in Britain and Scotland, as well as in South Africa at the national gallery in Cape Town over the next two years.

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Wells says that the Durban Art Gallery recently invited the project to participate in their 'Abelumbi - Untold Tales of Magic' exhibition, which looks at themes around medical magic practice and HIV/Aids.

The enormous success of the project in KwaZulu-Natal has paved the way for it to be launched in other provinces, as well as in other African countries.

Next year Wells plans to take the project to the Eastern and Western Cape and the project methodologies will be tested in rural Malawi amongst traditional craftspeople next year.

"Initially aimed at rural KwaZulu-Natal and other provinces in South Africa, it is envisaged that the resultant Siyazama model does have the potential to be utilised elsewhere within the continent of Africa, and for the future into countries in Asia and South America that have similar craft attributes.

Charmaine Pretorius is head of the Durban bureau of the South African Press Association.

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