

Meeting Women on our Virtual Tour of sub-Saharan Africa – August 15, 2021

Though we are starting our virtual tour in Cape Town, South Africa, we will likely ride on the second day through the tiny country of Eswatini (formerly Swaziland). The woman we will present to you this week is **Siphewe Hlophe**, from Eswatini, who has made a BIG impact though her country is small! One of the community-based organizations partnered by the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) in this area is **Swaziland Positive Living**. **SWAPOL** was co-founded and directed by Siphewe Hlophe and four other HIV-positive women in 2004 as a mutual support group to deal with the stigma and discrimination they were facing, and it now has 5,700 members in 45 communities, and a mobile clinic.

Siphewe's father had 3 wives and 24 children; only 6 of them are alive (17 died from AIDS). A Finnish family paid for her shoes and schooling, allowing her to graduate from University in 1984. She wanted to be a nurse but was told to take up agriculture. She was hired as an outreach worker by the Ministry of Agriculture, teaching better farming techniques around Swaziland. The offer of a scholarship to go to England for a masters degree was cancelled when medical tests revealed she was HIV positive. Her husband had many relationships outside the marriage but he publicly accused her of having sex with other men, putting the blame on her. As the result of the ensuing gossip, she was ostracized somewhat but other women in similar circumstances sought her out, leading directly to the formation of SWAPOL.

Hlophe loves Stephen Lewis because one day he told the king of Swaziland that she was more important than he was. "What kind of man is this?" she asked! When Stephen Lewis, acting as special envoy to the secretary-general of the United Nation, visited her and her people in Swaziland, the prime minister of that country had called Lewis, asking him to abandon his plans and come to the palace immediately, the King had requested him. Hlophe heard Lewis ask: "Is the King leaving the country, no, then tell him to wait, I'm coming," Hlophe cries out, still laughing at the indiscretion. "You know, I love that man (Lewis)." "When Stephen said we'll continue to meet with the women with the ideas, I was so excited," said Hlophe.

So, they went off to see the agricultural projects that SWAPOL has created. "He turned to me and said, 'I am going to Ghana tomorrow, but I am so touched I have for you a cheque for 30,000 American dollars.' I was running up and down, I was so excited," she laughs. Up to that point, her operation was running out of the back seat of her car. Now it had an office and a computer and plans for expansion.

When grandmothers tested positive they continued to offer themselves as public models of how one could live openly and well with HIV. This was radical behaviour that required exceptional courage and leadership. As a result, a new type of trust was built between grandmothers and their communities. They offered a safe space and the first point of counselling for many.

We were lucky enough to have Siphewe attend the Welcome Home Ceremony of our 2013 Cycle Tour at the Legislature. She had been in Vancouver for the Grandmothers Tribunal hosted by the SLF just a couple of days earlier and that worked out wonderfully for us. In addition, one of our cyclists, Lisbie Rae, met her when she attended the Grandmothers Gathering in Swaziland in 2010 with 42 other Canadian delegates. "Nothing daunted Siphewe. When the Queen Mother of Swaziland told Siphewe that she was banned from the banquet planned for all the delegates, Siphewe simply said, 'If I can't go, then none of the Canadians will go and all the international press will leave.' Nothing more was said and Siphewe was the real queen of the banquet."



Information taken from: stephenlewisfoundation.org, *Powered by Love and 28 Stories of Africa* (available from our VG4A lending library), as well as personal conversations with Christine Scott and Lisbie Rae.

Siphewe Hlophe speaking at the Welcome Home for Cycle Tour 2013