

## Swaziland Positive Living



*Siphewe Hlophe, organizer of the first African Grandmothers' Gathering and March, cheers on her fellow grandmothers in Manzini, Swaziland on May 8, 2010 (Ricki Horowitz)*

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 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.

SWAPOL helps develop projects like medical care, sourcing nutritious food and developing community safety. They find medical aid for those who are sick and they look after the orphans who are left behind. They have expanded to incorporate projects like community gardens and creating small businesses.

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. Their homes, which had started as havens for their children and grandchildren, became destinations for others with nowhere else to turn. Thulisile, a SWAPOL volunteer, shares: "I find that people are coming here for counselling and support and to ask me about private matters. Some come here and present rashes or other symptoms and they will ask me what I think it is. I know they are too afraid or ashamed to talk to anyone else. That is when I get an opportunity to talk to them about HIV, about knowing their status and the best way to approach it."

As the years have progressed grandmothers all over sub-Saharan Africa are becoming the growing voice of experience and authority on how community programs in tandem with medication are the only solution for successful treatment.

"Our grannies have changed so much. When we first started to work with them it was because they were the ones in our communities that were the most desperate and needed the most help. For those who have been in groups all these years, they are now the people we work with who are the most advanced, who have the most to offer their communities." says Cecile Dlamini, program co-ordinator, SWAPOL, Swaziland.

Information taken from: [stephenlewisfoundation.org](http://stephenlewisfoundation.org) and *Powered by Love*

Prepared by Margie Cogill of the VG4A Education Working Group  
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