

Winnie Mabaso South Africa (1941-2007)

Imagine you notice young children alone on the streets of your neighborhood. You start talking with the children and you find out they are hungry and walking around alone because their parents are sick with a very bad disease or dead. What would you do?

Winnie decided to do something. She started standing beside her gate with soup and bread. Within a few years she and a group of neighbors were providing food for 1700 children and many adults, and providing a number of other services. Why? Because, as Winnie told a reporter, "If I don't do it, nobody would. This has got to start somewhere." (Johannesburg, 2004)

Instead of wandering the streets, forgotten, many orphans found not only food and a place to live, but also something else they needed very badly: love.



Winnie Mabaso and some of her children.

Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman, in Hanes, 2006.

Zenzele's Beginnings

This story happened in Finetown, an informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa. Winnie was a retired schoolteacher. She decided to offer soup to a few of the neighborhood children. She stood at her garden gate to serve them and they brought their own bowls and spoons. Soon there was a line down the street every day of children waiting for soup. Then she started to let children take a nap in her house now and then. She started visiting their sick parents and trying to help them.

Soon she was finding it all too much for her alone, so she asked neighbors to help her, and they did. By 2003, twenty neighborhood volunteers had joined her. They were not only cooking for and feeding children three times a day, but they were also visiting and feeding their sick neighbors, and caring for them and helping them in other ways.

By 2005, the volunteer group had grown to 50. They called their group Zenzele — a Zulu word that means "do it yourself." Winnie's house had become a day care center, an orphanage, a network for the care of the sick, and a feeding center for others besides children.

Mabaso's husband, who died in 2004, was not pleased with having 20 orphans living in his house. But Winnie said, "I said, 'There's nothing to discuss.'" (Hanes, 2006)

The number of orphans coming to her house every day increased when a myth began to circulate in Finetown. The myth was that a man could be cured of HIV/AIDS if he slept with a virgin. The only way to be sure someone is a virgin is if she is a child, so many of the orphans were being raped. After she found this out, Mabaso encouraged children to come to her house during the day so they would be safe.

From 20 to 60 Orphans

To keep all this going, Mrs Mabaso went to churches and companies around the area asking for donations, especially of food and clothing.

After visiting the orphanage in 2004, Lisa Ashton, a BBC reporter, returned to her country and began fundraising for Winnie. Lisa even got her husband Steven and daughter Lisa involved in her fundraising efforts. To raise money for the orphanage, Steven did a freefall from 10,000 feet; and the three of them did a parachute jump. (Cole, 2007)



Volunteers prepare lunch.

Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman, in I Hanes, 2007.

After the Christian Science Monitor published an article about Zenzele in 2006, many readers sent donations.

During the years 2005-6, thanks to these donations, Mabaso increased the number of orphans living with her from 20 to 60. This required, among other things, moving to another house and improving the bathroom and shower facilities. Mabaso also cleverly enlarged the day care center by obtaining some huge shipping containers and making them into classrooms in her back yard.

Mrs. Mabaso's Other Hats

To keep all this going, Mrs. Mabaso constantly worked on developing relationships with donors in South Africa and outside the country.

Mabaso also arranged trainings for volunteers so they could do their work better. For example, some volunteers have had government-funded training in basic nursing and home-based care.

Some of the neighbors Mabaso and her helpers worked with were eligible for government assistance. Because they were illiterate, they couldn't read government publications or fill out the necessary papers. Zenzele volunteers helped their neighbors with that. They educated people about who qualified for assistance and how to apply for it.

Through Mabaso's seemingly endless energy a sewing project was started for AIDS sufferers. She arranged for people to donate sewing materials, so that AIDS sufferers would get out of

"I never planned this. I didn't know it would get this big."

--Winnie Mabaso

--As quoted in Hanes, 2007

their houses twice a week to be around other people and have something to think about other than being sick, as well as something useful to do.

Winnie Mabaso had that ability that so few have: a "halo of calm" (in Hanes, 2007) even in the midst of chaos.

The Future

As this is being written, in early 2008, the future of the Zenzele Orphanage and Daycare Center is uncertain. Unfortunately, Mabaso passed away in January 2007 after a short illness. Hundreds came to her funeral.

Mabaso's sister, Linda Tukela, took over Mabaso's position, and other members of the Zenzele staff have continued on. As of August 2007 her house is still home to 60 children and providing food for as many as 150 people a day, when there is food. Unfortunately, there isn't always food on the shelves. Donations have declined for various reasons and there are some legal problems. When hopefully they are resolved, local companies, neighbors and other donors will regain their confidence that the Zenzele orphanage is continuing and deserves support.

Lisa Ashton has set up a The Winnie Mabaso Foundation (www.winniemabaso.org) and is determined that the Foundation's money be used "for the benefit of the orphans." (Hanes, 2007).

"I saw people suffering and no one helping the infected and affected; and the abuse of kids orphaned by AIDS forced me to do something."

-- Winnie Mabaso
--As quoted in:
Johannesburg, 2003

Neighbors and HIV/AIDS

According to the United Nations, 5.5 million people are affected by HIV/AIDS in South Africa - more than in any other country. Several other African countries have very large numbers of people affected. Government and aid groups are unable to provide care for everyone who needs it.

Thus neighbors have to step in. Like Mabaso and the Zenzele volunteers, these angels, often poor people themselves, care for their neighbors, and feed and care for their children. You can easily find their stories by searching on the internet.

References and Further Reading

The material above was based on the following articles:

Cole, Penny 2007 *Barber's hair-raising leap for orphans*. The Glossop Advertiser, 5/30/2007.

http://glossopadvertiser.co.uk/news/s/52835_barbers_hairraising_leap_for_orphans

Hanes, S. 2006 *A Safe Place for Children in the Age of AIDS*. Christian Science Monitor, July 27, 2006 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0727/p14s02-woaf.html>

Hanes, S. 2007 . *South Africa Orphanage Persists Without its Founder*. Christian Science Monitor. Aug 1, 2007 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0801/p13s03-lihc.html>

Johannesburg official web site *The Caring Woman Who Puts the "Fine" into Finetown*.
February 18, 2004 <http://www.joburg.org.za/content/view/904>

Discussion or Essay Questions

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. Also, if you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.

1. Winnie Mabaso was certainly a compassionate woman. Write or talk about a compassionate person you admire. Describe what she or he does or did that you admire.
2. What personal abilities and/or qualities do you think lay behind Winnie Mabaso's success? Name several and explain what she did that makes you think she had that ability or quality.
3. Is HIV/AIDS a problem in your country or a country you know about? If the answer is "no", explain why you think it isn't. If it is, explain why it is a problem and what the problems are that this disease causes.
4. In some countries, people don't like to talk about HIV/AIDS. Explain why you think that is. What are the effects of not talking about it?

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