

November 2007 Mloka Visit

Dear Everyone,

Last week was very special – I went with two members of ZAPHA+ to a small village near the Selous game reserve to meet with some people who have tested positive for HIV. The area is near the Rufiji River and there is a group of three small villages that have very little resources. The government is not able to support every single village in Tanzania and therefore they do not have a doctor, ARVs, drugs for their unborn children to prevent them from being born positive or any formal sense of counseling services for people who are HIV+. If they are eligible for ARVs they have to travel over 100km to the nearest government hospital. There is a very nice man from the Ministry of Social Welfare testing people for 3 months – so far he has tested 200 people and 20 are positive – that's 10%. I learned of this when I went on safari with Keith, Alanna and Edmund in September and so I emailed Nicola, the owner of Coastal Travel, and asked if he could fly me and some ZAPHA+ members down to speak with these people. I knew that we wouldn't be able to offer them any answers but at least our members could share with them how ZAPHA+ has become strong and possibly give them just a glimmer of hope for the future. I am amazed at the wonderful doors that open if I just ask – people are often willing to offer some help if they are able.



This was Rahma's first time on an airplane and her first time out of Zanzibar!!! She appreciated every moment of it and was beside herself when she saw some elephants from the plane and giraffes across from the airstrip. Rahma and Kassim had both gotten all dressed up in their best to impress the villagers in Mloka. Chloe, the manager and Dunstan, a driver for Impala Safari camp arranged the entire visit. Dunstan was so kind to drive us out there – he cares a lot for the people in the village. He impressed me so much – he has a good relationship with so many people in the village and he listens to them. He is a wonderful representative for Impala Camp and Coastal Travel as far as the community relations in the area. And it is wonderful that Nicola cares about the surrounding area of the reserve – it's not all about taking tourists on safari!!



We met in the courthouse behind the clinic. Chloe, who is the manager of Impala camp, had kindly made sandwiches and we shared them with the women. The villagers had originally arrived at 9:00am but our flight was late so most of them had gone home which was completely understandable. But there were four women who Kassim and Rahma spoke with and I think that it was a great success in many different ways. The women told their stories of becoming infected and having no hope. Rahma asked one of them what her CD4 count was (this is to know whether or not someone is eligible for ARVS (anti-retrovirals), but the woman didn't know.) There is no official doctor at the clinic, there are no ARVS available and the people would have to travel

over 100 km to the government hospital in Utete to be treated and that is very expensive. One of the women was pregnant but she didn't think that there was any novarapine available which a mother usually takes just before birth to lower the risk of the child being born HIV+. (there is a clinic there so there could possibly be that drug available and she didn't know it)

I was feeling such despair and wondering if I had done the right thing by bringing some of the members of ZAPHA+ to tell these women about all the things that are available in Zanzibar but not available here in Mloka. It was wonderful though for Kassim and Rahma to realize that there are people who are in much dire straits than they are. Rahma is a mother with 4 children (1 who is positive), her sister's 5 orphans and her brother's HIV+ son. Yet Rahma has worked so hard at ZAPHA+ - she managed a cooking/nutrition project and is now a peer counselor at the HIV clinic at Mnazi Moja Hospital. Kassim is one of our best peer educators – he goes out with a team on weekends to local bars to distribute condoms and give information concerning HIV. Thirty minutes into talking about his experience Kassim turned to me and said “Kathryn we have to help these people!”. That was very heartwarming but none of us had any immediate answers – the government is not going to bring in a doctor or ARVS so the people have to take care of themselves. I don't quite understand myself why the government tests people in areas where they know that they don't have treatment – what is the point of telling people that they are going to die?? I am not one to judge – the government could easily have a long term plan that I am not aware of.

Stigma is overwhelming when someone is alone with their disease – we have found at ZAPHA+ that stigma is reduced as the members come together and become stronger as a group. It was very courageous for these four women to come to the courthouse to be open about their status. They were hungry for information and knowledge about HIV and what they might be able to do to help themselves. Kassim and Rahma told them how ZAPHA+ had begun with only a few members when there was no medication. Many people were dying but they supported each other. Now Zanzibar has ARVS available, ZAPHA+ has over 500 members in Pemba and Unguja and they have built a good relationship with the government agencies and various donors.

We did talk about the possibility of some of the people in Mloka meeting at the courthouse once a week to support each other. There are people in the village who are willing to help them get started. We discussed the option of them becoming a registered NGO in the future – ZAPHA+ began with 26 members. If they choose to become an NGO they will then have more of a voice and options to reach out to the government and various donors to help themselves.

One of the best things of the day happened as we were leaving. We had given the women a ride back to the village, dropped them off at various places along the road and then stopped at the market (always have to go shopping). As we were driving out of the village one of the women came out of her house and she and Rahma waved and smiled at each other – she will never have to be alone in her heart again. I always say we cannot quantify self respect and dignity – this was a prime example of that.

I don't know what the future will hold for these people but a seed has been planted. PLHAS can help each other even without government or donor support – it's all about people helping people. My friend Suleiman defines rich in this way “I'm rich if I have enough to share with someone else”. That is not always money – sometimes it is time and caring. Nicola was kind enough to fly us to the village and Rahma and Kassim were wonderful spending their day trying to help others. It was a good first step.

Kathryn