

Aftermath Mitigation

Masiye Camp

Ezekiel Mafusire

Thandi's story

Thandi is the firstborn child in a family of four children. Her father died in 1997 and this marked a decline in living standards for the family. The family had to move from their familiar home, friends and neighbourhood. Soon relatives started fighting over her father's estate. Her mother, who had been ill for some time even before the death of her husband, could not take it anymore and moved to a rural area with Thandi's siblings. Thandi was left in the care of an uncle.

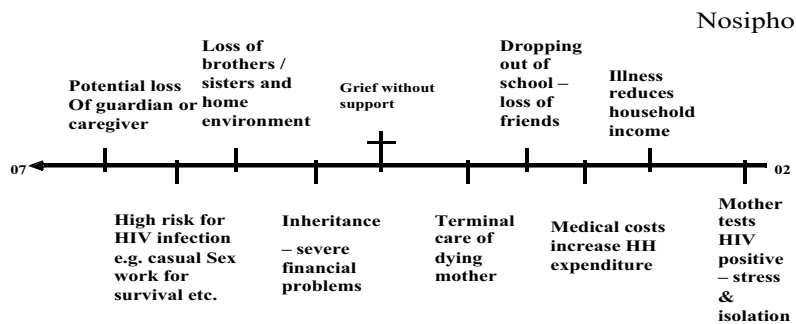
For some reason the uncle would regularly visit Thandi's ailing mother while Thandi was not allowed to see her. Thandi's mother passed on in 1998 after several months.

Life became very difficult for Thandi and her siblings. The uncle used up all her father's pension which was meant for their school fees. The kids were too young to understand what was going on at that time. Her brother who was in his second year of high school dropped out of school because his fees had not been paid for a long time. They were unable to access their father's benefits as there was no adult to sign for them, since they were all busy fighting for the money themselves. Thandi's performance at school began to deteriorate. Soon she had enough and decided to pack her bags and move in with her grandmother and siblings. Soon the grandmother started to verbally abusing them.

Stories like these are witnessed frequently at the Salvation Army's Masiye Camp for children affected by AIDS. Masiye Camp is situated in the southeast of Zimbabwe, near the second largest city called Bulawayo. Zimbabwe is located in the southern part of Africa and borders South Africa among other neighbouring countries.

The following illustration describes the context that inspired the formation of this camp—the situation of many children like Thandi, affected by HIV/AIDS.

Impact of AIDS on a Child – „Walking the Road“



The concept of Masiye Camp evolved in 1994 as a response by the Salvation Army to the increasing challenge of children affected by AIDS. The Salvation Army by that time was running a few community-based orphan-care programs. However it was noted that most Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) programs in Zimbabwe, including their own, focused on material support, monitoring and school fees. There was concern that the vital area of psychosocial impact and support was not being adequately addressed. During 1994, the Masiye Camp concept came into being: a place of learning and facilitation of practically applied psychosocial support through life-skills camps based on experiential learning methodologies. By December 1998 the first camp took place, attended by 40 children.

One of Masiye's first campers, Beven Mwachande (now aged 22 years), after being mentored by Masiye, started his own orphan-care program called Loving Hands, which is reaching out to many children in rural Zimbabwe. Beven's story is featured in the 2000 Masiye documentary called "The Bridge of Life."

Thandi also attended Masiye Camp where she found help and support in her journey. Today she is working on her degree in media and journalism at a university in Zimbabwe.

Camp activities

Masiye offers a 10-day camp for orphans from around the country. The idea of the camp is based on the principles of Outward Bound, which encourage trust and team building through adventure learning. This method of giving life skills through bush camps is an old African tradition still practiced in some societies and has been revitalized to address this new stress on the community. For many children, the camp is their first opportunity to relax and express themselves to someone who listens. Camps that focus on orphans and children living with ill parents are held during school holidays in May, August and December. Teenage courses that focus on child-headed households and children living with ill parents are held in between. The children who attend the camp are identified by other child-serving organizations. The counsellors are volunteers, and most are orphans themselves, which enables the children to identify with them and leads to the

development of more appropriate personal solutions. Recreational activities, such as canoeing, raft building and hiking are used to strengthen the children's interpersonal skills.

Project for children under five

With a high mortality rate of children below the age of five, mainly due to HIV/AIDS, there has been a gap in improving the care and support for both the child and the caregiver. In 2002 we started bringing together caregivers, most of whom are grandparents, for training and facilitating the process of sharing lessons amongst themselves. I attended two such camps that were held at rural schools in the community around Masiye Camp.

Some of my observations were:

- There was a lot of laughter and joy as caregivers were interacting (something rare due to the nature of difficult rural life)
- Caregivers were learning new games to play with children
- Children were playing together
- The process brought adults, babies and young people together—something that is also rare but very exciting

Masiye is now working with the village leaders to set up play centres in the rural areas—a request that was brought forward by the caregivers.

Life skills camps for children between 6 and 11

Just like the program for children under five, the camps for kids aged 6-11 bring us face-to-face with children both infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. I remember a very sullen and distressed looking 11-year-old girl called Susan. Our camp leaders could not figure out why she was so withdrawn. Interestingly one female leader noticed that she had only one set of clothing and we thought that might be the reason. So we gave her some new clothes, a bag and shoes. It was amazing how much joy she then showed throughout the camp—she became talkative and very involved in group activities. This kind of instant and dramatic transformation in children does occur and it helps us understand some of the issues affecting the world of children.

During these camps we also talk about child abuse and issues surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Camps for children between 12 and 15 years old

This camp is similar to the camp for kids aged 6-11. The adventure-based activities are the same, though we tend to do more interactive discussions on topical issues such as

sexuality, HIV/AIDS, sexual/child abuse and other issues as well. The program resembles the child-headed households (CHH) camp.

However, the CHH camp deals more directly with difficult issues affecting children. At these camps we occasionally have children with specific issues like behavioural problems and abuse. I have personally dealt with issues of lesbianism, rape, bullying and evil spirit possession. The latter happened when a girl of 16 started growling at me after shouting at me to pray for her. It took almost two hours praying and talking to her to finally have her calmed down and being herself. This was quite frightening for some of my young leaders but something they are not surprised at when they come across it.

A typical day at camp begins with exercises, then group devotions followed by breakfast. After breakfast there is chapel then a short break followed by an interactive discussion on the given topic. The evenings are a great party of praise and worship, stories and performances by campers with a devotional and prayer conclusion. Campers usually sleep well at camp.

Psycho-social wellness

Central to the three camps is the issue of grief support. Children are given an opportunity to share about personal losses in a supportive environment. These sessions take the whole day and subsequently map the way leaders will be working with each individual child. At the camp for children heading households we bring in different speakers including police officers who address topics such as crime, drug and alcohol abuse and also explain the availability of victim-friendly police camps and courts.

High and low rope activities are by far the highlight for both campers and staff. There are amazing stories and experiences that come during the debriefing session at the end of each activity.

In the 2003 research done on these camps, it was revealed that children who have been to Masiye exhibited a great sense of self-awareness and their self-confidence was tremendously higher than the control group of those who had never been to camp. The Masiye camps also place a high importance on other skills such as table manners, respect for self and others and use of amenities. One of my favourite topics is self-image. In one of these sessions in December last year, the group managed to help a teenager find alternative ways to express anger and deal with ridicule. Answers usually come from fellow campers as we discuss issues and this helps us not to impose our views on them.

At the end of each camp we present campers with a paper on contact details of service providers around them.

Youth drop-in centre

The drop-in facility allows us a platform to interact with ex-campers and youth in general and is a post-camp program. We currently have a hall at our offices in Bulawayo where we regularly meet with young people. However, we are still looking for facilities that would attract youth and provide a suitable environment for interaction.

Splash Girls

This is a bicycle courier service operated by orphan girls who have come through the camps. All nine girls who are currently in the program are heading households. This project is helping to economically empower girl orphans who often face more challenges than the boy child.

Training

Masiye is involved in training others to work with orphans and vulnerable children. We teach about setting up camps, and how adults can intervene. We do three regional facilitation workshops per year, targeting program managers and caregivers. Participants come from countries in south, east, west and central Africa. Masiye has developed partnerships that facilitate the sharing of models, methods and stories.

Major economic challenges

The root cause of the financial stress is the adverse socio-political environment. Zimbabwe is a country under sanctions due to the problems faced soon after the land-reform program. Donor agencies have either pulled out of the country or they are withholding funds until issues of governance they are not happy with are addressed. Due to these factors, Masiye has seen dwindling numbers of both local and international visitors to the camp and this is heavily affecting our ability to run the 15 camps we do per year. Even when we do a camp we are now forced to cancel the camp, cut back on the quality of food or cut down on the number of children. In an environment where the demand for our services is growing, we feel so powerless and frustrated by it all.

We are also contemplating downsizing our staff, which means loss of income for families and more challenges for the children as well. Lack of sound funding means we cannot follow up on children—we cannot afford to have a reserve fund for children's emergencies such as medical, school, and legal fees.

We are also unable to provide small incentives for our volunteers to motivate and encourage them.

Masiye has a desire to expand the camp's carrying capacity from 80 to 300 children. Further capacity means larger groups will be able to rent our facilities, thereby increasing our revenue base to invest back into the program.

We need funding to purchase equipment such as climbing gear, canoes, and the installation of a professional high ropes course. With all these things in place we can easily attract paying visitors.

We need to furnish our drop-in centre with games, tables, and chairs in order to create a youth-friendly environment.

Solid funding means we can effectively participate with our colleagues and partners in lesson-sharing and transfer.

Conclusion

Masiye has had a good name in Africa but we cannot say we are experts. One wise man once said, “In times of rapid change, learners will grow but experts will find themselves well-equipped and knowledgeable in a world that no longer exists.” We are part of the solution in a field where many community-based initiatives are helping children. As program implementers we are also losing beloved ones to HIV/AIDS. However, hope is always there and it keeps us going.

HIV/AIDS has posed both a challenge and an opportunity for the human race to trust God, partner and offer mutual support. None of us are experts but learners in the journey called *life*.

Ezekiel Mafusire oversees a staff of 90 employees as the director of the Salvation Army Masiye Camp in Zimbabwe. Masiye Camp, identified by UNAIDS (2001) as a best-practice organization, emphasizes the psycho-social needs of children.