

## “Passionate” Volunteers Take HIV Prevention to Their Neighbors

Windhoek — A blanket of yellow *eshosholo* flowers covers the hillside neighborhood where Elizabeth Eichas, 34, and her husband, Melisedek Goagoseb, 31, make their home in a one-room shack (see cover). The house is made of tin, salvaged doors and windows, and a floor paved with empty beer bottle upside-down in the dirt. The flowers are a bright, hopeful, reminder of this year’s long rainy season. From their hilltop home, Eichas, who is HIV positive, spreads a different kind of hope through their work as volunteer HIV prevention counselors, or “Passionate,” with the NGO DAPP Namibia.

DAPP — or Development Aid People-to-People — manages a national network of paid Field Officers and volunteers like Elizabeth through a program called Total Control of the Epidemic (TCE).

“It’s a system built on training and trust,” said DAPP Namibia director Kirsten Moller-Jensen. “Field Officers receive formal training and Passionates don’t. But in the end, it’s about the person. You have to have a passion to serve your community and you have to work yourself into it to deserve the community’s trust.”

To earn that trust, Field Officers spend hours each day going door-to-door in their assigned communities. After training, DAPP Namibia’s 700 Field Officers spend three years in a neighborhood in their home region. Over the three year assignment, each Field Officer will work with at least 2,000 people, some of whom will supplement the Field Officer’s community outreach efforts as “Passionates.”



*Door-to-Door DAPP TCE Field Officer Johanna Shikesho visits with Hirja Ipinge, 34, in her cardboard and tin house in Katutura’s Havana neighborhood. DAPP’s 700 Field Officers in Namibia each support up to 2,000 people through weekly household visits. Over a three year period, Field Officers will meet several times with each household in their catchment area. (Photo: J. Pitman)*

“The name ‘Passionates’ comes from what we appeal to in people,” said Moller-Jensen, who has worked with DAPP in southern Africa for the last 15 years. “These volunteers — and the Field Officers — have a passionate heart for their community. Because that’s what it demands, isn’t it?”

Standing in the pounded dirt courtyard outside her front door, Eichas motioned to the wooden phallus she uses to demonstrate the proper way to put on and take off a condom. “I sit with my neighbors and share with them,” she said. “I help them learn how to follow one step with another.”

Eichas learned she was HIV-positive three years ago. Telling her family and neighbors wasn’t easy — “there were many who said, ‘go out of my house’ and threw water at us” — but she did it quickly. “You have to share your life,” she recalled. “Every life has good and bad things in it, so you have to be able to say, ‘It was like this or it was like that.’ When you can share your experiences with other people, then people start to think, ‘Maybe this woman’s story can help me.’”

From her hilltop home, Eichas supplements the work of her neighborhood’s Field Officer, Johanna Shikesho, by distributing condoms, giving condom demonstrations and lending an ear to anyone who wants to talk. It’s not always easy. “Some people are desperate for someone to talk to,” she said. “And sometimes, people expect you to

be a resource for issue one all the way to issue five.” Beyond HIV/AIDS, food, shelter and transportation are among the issues facing residents in this poor neighborhood. “It costs eight Namibian dollars (about US\$1.20) for a taxi to the clinic,” Eichas said. “That’s a lot of money.”

Hirja lipinge lives a short walk down the hill from Eichas’s house. Her shelter is also simple, about four meters by five meters, made of corrugated tin and insulated with cardboard. Magazine cutouts adorn the walls; a stack of simple cooking pots stands on a gas burner. On a recent afternoon, Johanna Shikesho stopped in for a routine visit. lipinge is HIV-positive and five months pregnant with her second child. She had been unemployed, but recently started working as a security guard. “How are things going?” asked Shikesho, settling in for a chat. lipinge wasn’t aware of her HIV status until she received a visit from one of Shikesho’s DAPP colleagues.

“I was living so healthy,” she said. “I felt I was OK. I read about HIV/AIDS in the newspaper, but [until I spoke to a DAPP Field Officer] I wasn’t in a position to realize it could apply to me.”

The Namibian Ministry of Health and Social Services (MOHSS) estimates about half of Namibia’s adult population may fall into this “health-and-unaware” category. DAPP Field Officers and Passionates play a critical role in referring people to HIV counseling and testing (HCT) services.

lipinge knows Eichas well. “In the past, when families had someone who was sick, they would hide them away,” she said. But DAPP’s Field Officers and Passionates like Eichas have helped families understand the importance of seeking treatment and facing the disease. The red and yellow “TCE” t-shirts worn by Field Officers and Passionates are now a common sight. “People are not hiding sick family members anymore,” said lipinge, who added that at least two neighbors had started antiretroviral treatment thanks to information from Eichas.

Back at her house, Eichas laughed when asked about her impact. “Oh, yes,” she smiled. “People are so used to seeing me with my box of condoms and information that when I go out without it, they say, ‘Where’s the box? Where’s the box?’”

DAPP Namibia’s relationship with CDC and PEPFAR dates to 2005. Other branches of DAPP in southern Africa are also PEPFAR grantees. As PEPFAR evolves into the cornerstone program in President Barack Obama’s Global Health Initiative, PEPFAR, the MOHSS, and DAPP are looking for ways to expand the services provided by the network of Field Officers and Passionates. Male circumcision referrals have already begun, and DAPP is working with the Ministry to secure legal permission for Field Officers to be trained in rapid HIV testing. Field Officers have also distributed insecticide-treated bed nets and information about immunization campaigns.

“DAPP has a great ability to collaborate with other partners,” said CDC Namibia Prevention Advisor Nick DeLuca. “It’s a great way to get out information and referrals to other services like PMTCT, HIV testing, Male Circumcision and treatment.”