

Camp

Something New for HIV/AIDS-Affected Youth in South Africa

Bruce O. Boston

Summer camp is an annual ritual of delight for millions of American youth. But for children in South Africa, the physical challenges, social skill-building, the friend-making, and the just plain fun of camp have been basically absent — until now.

These new campers have begun learning important communication and social skills. They have worked to understand their own cultural heritage and strengthened their coping skills for living in an HIV/AIDS-afflicted society. We want to create that possibility for as many as we can.



That delight was experienced by ninety-seven South African boys, ages eight to fifteen, who attended Camp Sizanani (Zulu for “helping each other”) from January 4-13, 2004, in the Magliesberg Mountains, about forty miles from Johannesburg and Soweto. They inaugurated the first-ever camp for HIV/AIDS-affected youth in Africa. Led by an international cadre of twenty-two counselors drawn from the United States (several of them former Peace Corps volunteers) and eight South Africans (mostly college students from Soweto University), the youth spent a week doing the things that campers do — nature hikes, theater games, scavenger hunts, arts and crafts, playing soccer, learning to swim, cleaning their residences, and developing “daily life skills” — the abilities to communicate, cooperate, and get along with others they will need to prepare for life in a country with a raging public health problem.

A Three-Way Partnership

Camp Sizanani was created by a partnership involving three organizations: HIV South Africa (HIVSA), an independent organization that provides social support for adults and youth who are under the care of the Perinatal HIV Research Unit (PHRU) of Soweto’s Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital (the nation’s largest), which operates through community-based clinics, and World Camps, Inc., a newly formed American venture, created specifically for the purpose of developing camp as an experience for HIV/AIDS-affected young people in African countries. World Camps is the dream-child of Reston, Virginia, attorney Philip Lilienthal, whose life-long commitment to camping has been shaped by three generations of family experience in running the well-known and highly regarded Camp Winnebago on Maine’s Echo Lake. The operation is like a three-legged stool — HIVSA provides the local institutional base; PHRU’s community clinics provide contact points for families; and World Camps provides the camp expertise.

The vision of the three partners is for Camp Sizanani to become a continuing model for several more camps around South Africa — and if successful, for the continent itself. Planning for a follow-up camp for about 150 girls to be held March 27 through April 8 is already underway. Four more camps will be held in 2004, eventually involving some 850 to 1,000 youth. HIVSA



hopes to extend the camps by branching out to the neighboring countries of Namibia, Lesotho, and Swaziland. Each camp expects to have thirty staff — with a growing number of home-trained South African staff, but with a continuing cadre of trained American counselors as well.

Camp Sizanani, whose per camper program costs (exclusive of counselor training, transportation, and administration) run to \$15 per child per day, has been launched largely by tapping the pocketbooks of neighbors, friends, local service clubs, and parents of Winnebago campers. But the uniqueness of the idea has begun to attract the attention of USAID and some foundations. The camp experience for African youth feels like an idea whose time has come.

HIV/AIDS Impact

According to Lilienthal, World Camps got its start as the outgrowth of a personal, life-long dream of returning to Africa to “do something worthwhile.” He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia in the mid-1960s, where he had conducted several camps for children during his two years there. A primary function of each new Camp Sizanani is to help HIV/AIDS-affected children increase their awareness of the disease, provide accurate information to combat the urban mythology surrounding it, and cope with its social effects — whether as a personal health issue or because of its impact on families and communities.

As most Americans are now heart-sickeningly aware, sub-Saharan Africa has



Camp . . .
an idea whose
time has come.
Thanks a million!



been laid waste by HIV/AIDS. At least a third of the population of more than thirty countries has been affected by the disease. Once the transition is made from HIV to full-blown AIDS — the normal course of events outside the U.S. — there is no protection against an opportunistic infection. Indeed, life expectancy for children in South Africa, as in many other African nations, is now decreasing. According to PHRU, a fifteen-year-old South African today has a 70 percent lifetime risk of AIDS, and Baragwanath Hospital's community clinics see more than 12,000 infected women every year.

"Sizanani will provide important social contact for children whose families may be ostracized or isolated because of the stigma attached to HIV infection," Lilienthal notes. "These new campers have begun learning important communication and social skills. They have worked to understand their own cultural heritage and strengthened their coping skills for living in an HIV/AIDS-afflicted society. We want to create that possibility for as many as we can."

The Sizanani experience does not confront the reality of HIV/AIDS directly, however, beyond education about HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, according to camp counselor Erica Phillips. She is a former Peace Corps volunteer in Niger and currently works as a New Jersey farmer, with an itch to return to Africa as an agriculturalist. A plus for Camp Sizanani over other contexts in which South African youth learn about HIV/AIDS is that they learned it in a context of trust from people like Erica, who daily demonstrated that they cared about

the kids. One camper's apt comment, as shared by his counselor Katlego Skosana in a recent *Christian Science Monitor* article about Camp Sizanani was this: "When we [campers] first came here, we never thought we'd get so much love from strangers, but it's true that we got love and we felt special."

The camp's core educational vehicle was provided by the sheer fun of camp activity. The games and life-skill sessions were constructed around everyday South African life, where the ostracism and stigma that often go with a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS are commonplace. Campers from families who were affected, or who were themselves "on meds," were "treated just like everyone else," says Phillips: "No big deal."

A camp experience for youth whose lives are daily touched by HIV/AIDS is, of course, not a public health solution for the millions who are affected. Indeed, all too many members of the generation just ahead of those who attended Camp Sizanani have already been infected or wiped out. But the camp experience does provide opportunities to teach important lessons about the dangers of unprotected sex, learn good health habits, lend support, show caring, and give young Africans a chance to develop better coping and decision-making skills. Michelle Schorn, director of community programs for HIVSA, says her agency is "committed to providing a resource for these young people, and to raising awareness of their tremendous value as a national resource. This disease has already devastated Africa, but much can be done to help the next generation acquire the skills needed to make a contribution.

And just as important, we want them to enjoy themselves, learn, grow, and equally important, just be kids for a while."

Just Like Your Average Camp

A typical day at Camp Sizanani is hard to differentiate from any other at any independent YMCA, Boy Scouts of America, or church camp that many of us might find familiar. Up by 7:15 a.m. for wake-up and cabin inspection, the boys would down an 8:15 breakfast, followed by a day-long rotation of created activities (sports, swimming, circle games) among randomly selected age-group divisions (named for African game animals), and punctuated by snacks, rest time, and meals. (For many the three-meal-a-day regimen was a complete novelty.) All day long the soccer balls flew, the paint pots sloshed, and the pool overflowed with splashing. As in all camps, the recreational philosophy at Camp Sizanani was "keep 'em moving." An evening assembly focused on story-telling, singing, and reflections on the day to help unwind charged-up campers and get them ready for the strict 9:00 p.m. bedtime. Two favorite activities were games of musical chairs — which these youth had never played before and enjoyed hugely — and learning to swim. Swim instructor Dale Dunlop, a retired pension fund administrator dubbed *Mkhulu* ("Grandpa") by his charges, proudly sported "a 100 percent success rate" among the urban boys — most of whom had never been in a pool before.

"World Camp's whole philosophy, throughout these camps," says Lilienthal, "is to provide activities that appeal to specific interests in kids. We want participation that appeals to the imagination, so we use the arts, nature, games, and theater — not just to teach, but to educate in terms of the Latin word's root meaning, *educere*, which means *to lead out*. We are always looking to find what's inside the child. We use competition and cooperation as mutually reinforcing contexts for group activity. For us, it's all process."

Sizanani's counselors were specially trained for their roles just the week before the camp began in sessions led by Michael Brandwein, the highly regarded developer of training experiences for camp, education, and youth services, as well as author of three successful books on running camps.

Brandwein brought to his first African training event a wealth of experience gleaned on five other continents. He saw his

first task as proving to the Sizanani counselors the value of what the campers themselves would be engaged in — learning by doing. "For the first fifteen minutes," he relates, "we had them play two initiative-type, problem-solving games. Without explaining why, we taught them the first game using a didactic style, providing specific directions and tactics to solve the problem. The second game was taught using a Socratic, questioning style, giving staff the responsibility for defining the problem, discussing their options — in short, *learning by doing* — the essence of camp. They saw that while both games were fun, the second approach also taught essential life skills."

In keeping with the wisdom that wherever you may go, "camp is camp," Brandwein's training was predicated on the sound assumption that "children, whatever their background or experience, would respond positively if treated with real respect, lots of care, and warmth. We were delighted to discover that our assumption was true. The camp environment is like super-enriched soil. Despite initial barriers, it can grow incredible things at remarkable speed."

Brandwein's training sessions had a big impact on the counselors, who found his amazing enthusiasm for the kids infectious. All the staff from overseas paid their own way to South Africa to be a part of the first Camp Sizanani. Several have commented in interviews that they found the most valuable skill they learned was "just listening." "When we are in another country and culture where we don't speak the language," Brandwein says, "it makes us focus on doing what leaders should do most — listen intently. And if we don't understand the words right away, we can listen not just with our ears, but with our hearts." Dale Dunlop's moving account of helping an eight-year-old boy through a bout of homesickness during the first couple of days still makes him tear up.

Counselor Brandy Hosso, a Phoenix schoolteacher who had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in South Africa, remembers Brandwein's insistence on using praise as a motivator. Many campers, she discovered, came from home environments where corporal punishment was the rule. Not surprisingly, she found that when praise was called for, it was a much better motivator than what they were accustomed to experiencing.

Follow Up: Kids Clubs

The Camp Sizanani partnership is deter-

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mined that what has been accomplished will not be a one-shot deal. Campers have already been invited to attend a follow-up weekend at a Saturday Kids Club — to reinforce their experience, promote the continuation of the camp ethos, and spread the word to other potential campers. Kids Club sessions will not only continue to support the values learned at camp but will also serve to identify key potential leaders among returned campers, who can help their fellow campers extend the impact Sizanani had on them.

World Camps has decided that, for the foreseeable future, each successive camp will serve a whole new population of youth — there will be no repeat attendees. This way, in addition to reinforcing the camp experience, the Kids Clubs will help former campers deal with the fact that they will not be returning to camp. Kids Club programs are to be mounted in residential areas, using the clinic network of Baragwanath Hospital as a base. As noted by HIVSA CEO Steven Whiting, "The Kids Clubs will provide continuing support to the children as well as to their parents and guardians. Once again, these children will have an opportunity to develop their communication and social skills, as well as receive ongoing education and awareness around HIV/AIDS . . . In a safe and secure environment, these vulnerable children can learn about love, trust, patience, acceptance, sharing, and enjoyment, and that someone out there really cares about them."

In Parting, "Thank You"

One of the last activities the Sizanani campers participated in was an arts project in which they composed their own "thank you" messages to the many individuals — in several countries — who had made contributions to making the camp possible. Unfettered by any preconceptions of what a "bread and butter note" should look like, they folded construction paper into myriad shapes and made liberal use of paints, crayons, magic markers, glue, glitter, pens, and pencils. Many not only signed their names but included addresses as well, with a plea

to "Please write me a letter." Some cards came from groups, some from individuals. Almost every camper either wrote a letter of his own or signed a collaborative effort. All came from the heart.

This exercise in reaching out was all the more endearing because of the obvious effort it took the campers to come to terms with an unfamiliar language and their complete success in delivering an emotional message that truly revealed their gratitude. Here are just a few notes of thanks.

"Thank you for donating money to us and I know you have faithful hearts." — The Mighty Boys of Camp Sizanani

"I like this camp because it is the first camp I ever went to." — Your child, Molatsi

"Thank you World Camp. You took us as your children." — Richmond Moshidi

"My name is Nhlanhla Khumalo. Thanks for what you did for us and for giving us an opportunity to express our talent . . . Thanks a million times."

And finally this unsigned gem, perhaps from a future philosopher: "Soul love and respect bring people together. Make the freedom to change, and we [are] all free from dark to lightness." Somehow, one cannot but believe that Nelson Mandela himself would be proud of that one. ■

Photos in this article courtesy of Philip Lilienthal, World Camps.

For more information on World Camps, visit the Web site at www.worldcamps.org, or write/e-mail: Philip Lilienthal, 1606 Washington Plaza, Reston, VA 20190, worldcamps2003@aol.com.

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