

BULLETIN

Little Travellers make big impact

August 1, 2010

The Report: August 2010 vol.31 num.4

THE TINY BEADED FIGURE HSA member Joanne Schwartz wears on her lanyard every day at work could be dismissed as just a colourful trinket. However, for Schwartz and for over 100 South African women infected with HIV, along with their families, this ornament has more value than the most luxurious of necklaces.

In fact, it represents survival, health, financial security, human dignity, and the power of ordinary people to make a difference in the face of the searing tragedy that is the AIDS/HIV epidemic in Africa.

The figure ... she picks one every day to match her outfit ... is called a Little Traveller. It is one of over 50,000 such figures that have been handmade by women at the Hillcrest AIDS Centre in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, where over 40 per cent of adults are infected with HIV.

Little Travellers are sold around the world. 100 per cent of the funds gathered goes to AIDS relief, in the form of a decent wage for the women who make them, as well as contributions to the Hillcrest AIDS Centre, whose services include medical care, education and awareness, emergency food parcels, long term agricultural development and income-generation programs. It is no exaggeration to say the Little Travellers are saving lives.

-They may be small, but they have made a big difference to me and my family. I was dying when I started making them... and I had nothing to live for... I now have a house, my children are going to school and I have a reason to live," writes Thandi Chamane, one of the women who makes the Travellers.

Schwartz, an addictions counsellor for patients with HIV at St. Pauls Hospital, has been part of the Little Travellers initiative since its beginnings five years ago.

-It started out as a family project; it's as grassroots as you can get," explains Schwartz. It began in 2005 with her brother, who, the summer before starting medical school, volunteered at the Hillcrest AIDS centre. There, he encountered the Little Travellers, which back then didn't do much travelling.

-The idea was to make little pins as a craft project to generate income from tourists, but sorry, no tourists visit AIDS centres," says Schwartz with a laugh. -He brought 20 home and we started selling them as a family.

-When we'd sold over a hundred, my Mom said "Wow. It seemed like a lot. Now we've sold over 50,000 and made more than \$300,000!"

Friends joined in and the initiative grew through word-of-mouth and individual effort. People fall in love with the project, says Schwartz, and want to help. So they buy the Travellers in bulk to give away as presents, or they sell them at events or through organizations.

Part of the beaded figures' charm is their price; at \$5 - \$7 each, most people can afford them. -I tell people, it's the price of your latte," says Schwartz.

As their name promises, Little Travellers have indeed travelled around the world, raising not just funds but also awareness.

-The educational aspect is really important," says Schwartz. The Little Travellers organization regularly puts on events, and each Traveller comes with its own passport that tells the story of its origins.

This story is a tragic one, says Schwartz. -In South Africa, about 25 per cent of the population is infected with AIDS; here it is .02 per cent. The situation there is shocking; they dont have access to anti-retrovirals, there isnt room in the hospitals• Try to imagine what it would be like, if close to half the population was affected. How do you care for those people? How do you cope with that much loss? Who can take care of the children? Thats what its like in the region the Little Travellers come from."

Support for the project has been overwhelmingly positive, says Schwartz. Shes particularly pleased with the encouraging response she has received at her workplace, St. Pauls, where she is an addictions counsellor for people with HIV.

-Working in the HIV field, I have an amazing market of people who know and care about the issues. Colleagues at St. Pauls have been great; my boss wears a Little Traveller on his lanyard and encouraged me when I wanted to sell them at a table outside the lunch room."

She is thrilled by the support from HSA. While Schwartz was attending Steward training last year, Labour Relations Officer Leila Lolua noticed her Little Traveller pin and invited her to speak to the group about the project. She not only sold a bunch, but also was invited to set up a table at the 2010 convention.

-The response was incredible; we brought in about \$1000 in two and a half days! It doesnt really surprise me because the goals of Little Travellers are totally consistent with what HSA does. These are people who care about advocacy and human rights so of course they are supportive."

At work, Schwartz counsels people infected with HIV/AIDS who have addictions ... whether to drugs, alcohol, gambling or other addictive substances and activities. Its challenging work ... just getting clients to come regularly to appointments, given that their lives are often chaotic, is hard, let alone supporting them through the complex work of understanding and managing an addiction. But it is hugely gratifying as well.

-A lot of these people are so marginalized. Many of them have never had anyone listen to them or show they care. If I can make a bit of difference, thats a lot," she says.

Schwartzs volunteer work is a welcome balance to her professional life, she says.

-With Little Travellers, its a very tangible and practical way that I am helping, right away, whereas in counselling it can take years for people to get insight into their problems. Its very satisfying to say, hey, we raised \$5000 and its all going straight to help people."

Schwartz says working in the HIV/AIDS field, both in her professional and volunteer life, is fascinating. -Theres a very strong connection between the local and global. Its a new disease but there is amazing research going on and work being done."

And in fact, Schwartz is connecting the global to the local every day she goes to work, her Little Traveller accompanying her, an ambassador from a place suffused not just with tragedy, but also with hope. 

If you would like to know more about Little Travellers or see the items for sale, visit www.littletravellers.net.

Type:

[The Report](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)