

# ***Our Place***

## **Initiative Description.**

Our Place is registered as a non-profit organization with the South African government, but to date, it has been funded entirely through the generosity of friends and other people committed to the fight against HIV-AIDS.

### **1. Mission and impact.**

The mission of Our Place is to provide a self-sustaining, caring environment for children and adults infected and affected by HIV-AIDS by empowering them to live with dignity and hope within a family structure. Our Place provides a “home to come to” for those people who do not have one because of the socio-economic consequences of HIV-AIDS. Our Place has carried out this mission through the creation of a hospice in the city of Bloemfontein, the capital of Free State, a province of South Africa with one of the highest rates of HIV infection.

Since its opening in 2003, Our Place has provided a home to over 300 people living with HIV-AIDS who have been abandoned by their families and who could not rely on public assistance for food, shelter, medical treatment, and emotional support. At present, there are 25 beds at Our Place; given that there is a waiting list of 140 people who are in dire need of a “home to come to,” Our Place has stretched its capacity to accommodate four more residents by using part of the floor space as additional beds.

The people who have found a home at Our Place have been extremely diverse in terms of age, race, socio-economic back-ground, sexual orientation, and illness stage. They have ranged from three-month old babies to people in their sixties; some have lived at our place for years, others have died a few days after they arrived.

The positive impact that Our Place has had on the quality of life of its resident community has been enormous; people living with AIDS often arrive at Our Place after having endured long periods of physical and emotional abuse in addition the pain caused by the symptoms of the disease. It is not uncommon for people living with HIV-AIDS to have been deprived of food, water, sunlight, human contact, and to have been subjected to rape, beatings, and sometimes even murder attempts before finding a home at Our Place.

Because Our Place does not receive government funding or substantial donations from private institutions, it is forced to operate on a very small budget; yet, there has never been a day when the residents of Our Place have had to go without food or water; their physical pain is alleviated thanks to the palliative care provided by the care givers, who are supervised by certified nurse Deon Mulder.

Our Place has also made it possible for its residents to access medical care by providing transport to the local hospital facility, and through volunteer doctors who visit patients at the hospice on a regular basis. No less important is the emotional support that every resident receives as he or she becomes part of the family structure that gives life to Our Place. This emotional support is crucial in nurturing the sense of purpose and worth that empowers people who have HIV-AIDS to live with dignity and hope.

While the improvement of the quality of life people living with HIV-AIDS is the main goal of this initiative, Our Place has been very active in fighting the spread of the disease by encouraging both resident and non-resident members of the community to get tested, by offering free pre and post-test counseling, by promoting responsible sexual practices, and through an outreach program that has involved schools, parishes, health workers, and mine workers.

## **2. Community empowerment.**

One of the ways in which Our Place nurtures the sense of worth and purpose of the people who become part of the family structure is through their direct involvement in the initiative. Residents participate in the running of the project at all levels. According to their health, abilities and inclinations, they take responsibility for daily household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, working in the vegetable garden, and taking care of repair work. They create the family structure that they are a part of by caring for each other, often taking on the roles of mother and father figures for the orphan children in the community. Residents are also actively involved in the management of Our Place through their membership in the Directing Committee.

Our Place promotes self-empowerment by helping its residents claim a positive role in society despite the stigma attached to HIV-AIDS. Our Place has been fighting to ensure that AIDS orphans be accepted in nursery schools like any other children; Our Place ensures that children continue going to school when their parents are no longer able to pay for tuition fees because of the consequences of HIV-AIDS on family budgets. Our Place has helped community members find employment by sponsoring training and by providing transportation to worksites.

As residents testify, the empowerment process at Our Place has involved members of the community in equal measure, regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and religious beliefs.

## **3. Greater involvement and empowerment of People Living with HIV/AIDS.**

The impact Our Place has had on the fight against HIV-AIDS extends well beyond the drastic improvement in the quality of life of its residents. During the day, Our Place functions as a community center open to all people affected and infected by the pandemic. Everyday, dozens of people call in for counseling and to take part in family life, sometimes helping with chores, sometimes sharing a meal. The kitchen of Our Place guarantees a warm meal to several families who live in the area surrounding the center. Our Place also provides employment to several community members, making it easier for biological family structures to remain intact despite the devastating impact of HIV-AIDS on household incomes.

## **4. Sustainability and action at scale.**

Our Place has grown out the successful experience of similar community projects started by Deon Mulder in the Transkei, a former homeland (during the apartheid era) that is now part of the South African province of Eastern Cape. As in other former homelands, the consequences of the AIDS pandemic in the Transkei are particularly severe and the infection rate high due to the Apartheid economic policies and labor laws, which deliberately sought to create a pool of cheap migrant workers who were forced to live in mining compounds far away from their families.

These initiatives, which have been built on the same vision that characterizes the mission of Our Place, have included the creation of nursery schools, soup kitchens, and foster homes in the villages of Mvezo, Nceba, Canzibe, and Zithulele, which are among the poorest in the area. While these centers have become financially independent/sustainable and are run by the people of the local community, they have also formed a network of strategic alliances through the exchange of human and material resources.

It has been very difficult to cover the operating costs of Our Place since it has been funded only by the generosity of private individuals who believe in its mission. Nevertheless, two and a half years after its opening, Our Place continues to empower more and more people living with HIV-AIDS; despite all its financial difficulties, Our Place keeps growing. In July 2004, its capacity was expanded from 15 to 25 beds, as an extra room was built. At the same time, irrigation facilities were enhanced with the fitting of a pump and the reparation of a borehole. These upgrades have made it possible to increase the agricultural output of the fields surrounding Our Place, reducing food expenses. Further upgrades of the irrigation facilities are planned in order to generate income from the trade of produce.

The growth of the initiative has been made possible by the growth of its support base constituted by the people who have embraced the mission of Our Place. Part of this support base is local; several

volunteers from Bloemfontein contribute to the sustainability of the project with their labor and with in-kind donations of items such as produce, furniture, house-hold appliance and clothing. Periodically, there are volunteers from other parts of South Africa and from overseas who spend time living and working at Our Place.

Most of the funding for Our Place is raised outside South Africa by international volunteers who have become committed to the mission of the project after having seen with their own eyes the impact that it is having in empowering people living with HIV-AIDS. At present, the strongest constituency is located in Italy, where supporters have formed a non-profit organization (Amici di Deon Onlus) in order to ensure the sustainability and growth of Our Place. Amici di Deon is recognized by the Italian government as a not-for-profit charitable organization (comparable to a US government designation of a 501(c) (3) status) and has been working in collaboration with local institutions such as city councils, public schools, parishes, and cooperatives. Amici di Deon has raised funds and awareness of the mission of Our Place through charity dinners, cultural events, toy sales, presentations, articles in the local press and a long-distance adoption campaign. In 2004, Amici Di Deon's donated approximately Euro 12000 to Our Place; in 2005, this contribution rose to approximately Euro 15000.

Friends of Our Place is a similar supporter group that is being formed in the United States. Friends of Our Place has not yet formalized its structure, but it has actively promoted the cause of Our Place in the New York area. Friends of Our Place's contribution to Our Place have been the following: in 2004, approximately \$1400; in 2005, approximately \$ 2800.

Another group of regular supporters is The Holy Trinity Church parish in Tewkesbury, United Kingdom. A fund raising event has taken place in Canada and new groups of donors are currently being formed in Sweden and the Netherlands.

## **5. Gender equality.**

Our Place has helped to address the gender inequalities that fuel the spread of HIV-AIDS by providing a safe environment for women in a family structure that nurtures a person's sense of self-worth and purpose. This nurturing is particularly crucial in the case women, who have often contracted HIV-AIDS as the victims of sexual abuse and who are often used as scapegoats for the spread of the pandemic. The support system put into place by the initiative helps women to become community leaders who become positive role models for other women whose suffering from HIV-AIDS is compounded with problems created by gender inequality.

The female presence is very strong at all levels of the initiative. Approximately 65% of the total number of people who have lived at Our Place are women. Four of the seven Directing Committee members are women. The contribution of female professionals has played a crucial role in making the initiative's impact very incisive. While carrying out its mission, Our Place has been able to count on help of female doctors and social workers, which has provided female residents with a greater level of comfort while receiving medical attention. Our Place has also formed strategic alliances with other hospices in Bloemfontein where women have taken a leadership role, such as Sunflower House and Tsepo House.

## **6. Innovation.**

Our Place's unique approach to containing the spread of HIV-AIDS and to alleviating its devastating socio-economic consequences is built on a holistic approach that nurtures a person's self-worth and purpose, rather than a narrow focus on the disease that reduces people living with HIV-AIDS to medical cases or a statistical number. Our Place's approach is built on the belief that the social experiences of HIV positive people are pivotal to the quality and the length of their lives, and that empowering HIV positive people to live with dignity and hope helps to fight the stigma attached to the disease. This stigma promotes ignorance, which is the perfect breeding ground for the spread of the virus.

## **7. Partnership.**

In fighting the spread and consequence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Our Place has formed strategic alliances with several local institutions. Our Place has become an invaluable resource for all the city

hospitals, Sun Flower House (a hospice for children with AIDS), Tsepo house (a hospice for adults living with AIDS), and for the city of Bloemfontein's department of social service, which often refers to Our Place patients who are in desperate need of a home. Our Place also collaborates with Tsepo House, Sunflower House, and with the aforementioned Transkei community based projects through an ongoing exchange of human and material resources. Our place has formed a partnership with the Fish Mine Peer Educators project, whose delegates do voluntary work at Our Place while learning strategies to fight the spread and the consequences of the AIDS pandemic among mine workers.

Partnerships with schools, city councils, parishes, and cooperatives have also been formed in Italy through Amici di Deon and are in the process of being formed in other parts of the world by international volunteers who have worked at Our Place.

## **Issues to be addressed**

Our Place urgently needs to expand its capacity, given its the long waiting list of homeless people living with AIDS. Given the number of people living in desperate conditions in the Bloemfontein area, Our Place has had to accommodate a total of approximately 40 people as of December 2007. Given that the high number of orphans among its residents, Our Place needs to build separate facilities to be able to take special care of the children living in the family structure.

Our Place has also opened another center near the village of Coffee bay, in Transkei, which is currently accommodating 17 residents (December 2007). The new center also needs to be expanded.

### **1.Contact Information:**

Contact person for the initiative being nominated.

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### **References**

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# FREE STATE PROVINCE



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Sir

## **REGISTRATION: OUR PLACE**

The shelter for persons affected and infected by HIV/Aids were administratively registered by this department. The number is W4/5/9/1/2/1/A1.

Trusting you find this in order.

Kind Regards

\_\_K J Fourie\_\_\_\_\_  
pp District Manager

Datum: 2004-11-19