

Asenze and Mpilonhle Projects: Making it Happen in South Africa

Asenze. Translated from Zulu, it means, “let’s make it happen.” That’s precisely what Dr. Kathleen Braden, developmental-behavioral pediatrician and Director of the Shriver Center LEND program, has been doing through two innovative humanitarian projects for children and adolescents at risk for developmental and health problems living in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa’s poorest state.

The Asenze Project

The *Asenze Project*, funded by the National Institutes of Health, aims to measure the incidence and prevalence of developmental disabilities and the status of HIV in approximately 2000 preschool children (ages 4-7 years) living in five districts of KwaZulu-Natal. Dr. Braden joined the project as one of several consultants in September 2008 to supervise and assist in developmental and health assessments of local children. In addition, she has acted as a clinical resource to review testing results and medical aspects of the children’s care. Dr. Braden views her role as providing “an outsider’s perspective so that the full richness of the data can be understood.”

Dr. Braden cited numerous physical and cultural challenges in identifying households with children at risk. “To connect with families, data collectors and interviewer frequently traversed rugged terrain to arrive at rural homes without telephones, electricity or running water. Once there, they were often unable to meet directly with parents who had to work, so instead they met with other caregivers, which made capturing a child’s history difficult at times. Families needed to have transportation provided to get to the clinic. Assessments in the clinical center often took all morning, and included social, psychological, physical and neurological evaluations, as well as blood work. So there was much more to the work than just identifying a child’s disability,” Braden explained.

Children identified as HIV-positive were referred for medical care. Those confirmed as having developmental disabilities were referred for therapy. All will have their progress tracked entering school and measured again in two years.



Dr. Kathleen Braden (pictured) enjoys a light moment with one of the South African children from KwaZulu-Natal as part of her recent visit there (Photo courtesy of Asenze Project).

The Mpilonhle Project

The *Mpilonhle Project*¹ (meaning “a good life”) seeks to reduce the dramatic rates of teenage pregnancy and HIV-AIDS among the 9,800 South African teens attending 12 rural secondary schools near the town of Mtubatuba in the Umkhanyakude District through a strategic high school curriculum that includes education in healthy lifestyles, and provides HIV testing and counseling, health assessments, and computer training. The project uses three mobile health units that rotate among four secondary schools each and are staffed by dedicated Mpilonhle nurses, health educators, counselors, and computer technicians.

In September 2008, Dr. Braden conducted “listening sessions” with school administrators, teachers, and students and learned that teen pregnancy is considered to be the most pressing health issue other than the spread of HIV; 17-20% of adolescent girls are pregnant or already have 1-3 children of their own. These shocking statistics led Dr. Braden to begin developing a program to address the sexual and reproductive health of women in South Africa, the aim of which is to prevent health and emotional problems and support



A group of high school students in Umkhanyakude District, KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa listen attentively to advice on maintaining healthy lifestyles as part of the Mpilonhle project (Photograph by Angie Buckland, copyright of Mpilonhle).

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the parenting practices of youths who become pregnant during their school years. The program would expand the present health curriculum to include more information on teenage pregnancy, its associated mental health issues, and what parenting involves. It would include developing a tiered infrastructure of 72 local volunteer resource teachers and more than 35 peer youth counselors in the schools, supported by Mpilonhle’s six nurse practitioners and three social workers. These teachers and youth counselors would be trained to identify students at risk for or struggling with problems related to pregnancy and parenting, and offer them support and interventions on an ongoing basis. The volunteers maintain cell phone contact with the Mpilonhle team for emergencies when the team is offsite.

Dr. Braden has approached a private foundation to fund the project and hopes to begin work on it within the year.

“My project will support the health of pregnant girls and reduce the fear, confusion,

and mythology surrounding them,” Braden elaborated. “Anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of these high school students are orphans. They are extremely poor, and either raise themselves, care for their siblings, or live with other family members, due to the effect of AIDS on sick or dead parents and elders. While schools must abide by an official policy of inclusion for all children, there is no system in place to assist with or ensure the policy’s implementation. Therefore, considerable stigmatization exists of pregnant girls (and other youths with health, emotional or physical disabilities) in school. We expect our outcomes to demonstrate attitudinal changes among administrators, teachers and students, and empower these young women to guard themselves against unprotected sex, gender violence, and other commonly accepted high-risk situations.”

¹ The Mpilonhle project is funded through the former Bush Administration’s President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) program with start-up funding from the Angel Network founded by Oprah Winfrey and the Africa Outreach Project established by Oscar-winning actress and South African native Charlize Theron in partnership with the Entertainment Industry Foundation.



Shown in clockwise order: Mpilonhle Health Counselor Phumelele Mthethwa takes a student’s blood pressure (top right); A group of students gather around health curriculum materials (bottom right); Principal Bheki Nomandla of Silethukukhanya High School holds up a sign that says “Do it because you can.” (Photos by Angie Buckland, copyright of Mpilonhle).

Shriver Center spotlight

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