

The Hope Movement

Health and education have been given wheels in one of the poorest corners of the country. By *Glynis Horning*

→ WHEN A PAIR of cheerfully decorated trailers pulls up outside an impoverished school in the hills of far northern KwaZulu-Natal, pupils pour out excitedly. The entertainment factor alone would draw them in this place, where few people have jobs and little positive happens.

But screens fold out of the Mpilonhle Mobile Health and Education Unit, and a tent flowers between the trailers, creating four private rooms for HIV and Aids counselling, a central area for health and education talks, and a computer bank for online literacy classes, powered by a throbbing generator.


"Mpilonhle has brought light to our teachers and learners," exclaims Zanele Ncube, the principal of Masibonisane High School. "They have instilled confidence that taking charge of one's health is the key to leading a longer life, and also encouraged our students to abstain from drugs, alcohol and unprotected sex."

Her school is one of the 25 that Mpilonhle serves, along with 30 other community locations. The NGO, an initiative of Mtubatuba paediatrician Michael Bennish, MD, was launched in 2007, and the first mobile units were sponsored by Oprah's Angel Network and actress Charlize Theron's Africa Outreach Project (CTAOP). "Charlize visits two or three times each year, as her schedule allows, giving help and motivation," says Bennish.

"We now have six mobile units targeting the Umkhanyakude District," he adds. Mpilonhle, meaning a good

life, also gives learners counselling and education to help combat the stigma around HIV, domestic violence and sexual abuse, and computer lessons covering basic word-processing and Internet surfing: "It's a major draw-card," says Bennish.

The organisation distributes food parcels to 120 orphan-headed households, and, this year, drinking water and sports facilities are being provided at four schools through the support of CTAOP. Teachers are also being trained to use sport to teach life skills.

"Mpilonhle has decreased the high rate of teenage pregnancy at our school," says grade 12 pupil Ruth Khumalo, with pride. "It has changed our minds, teaching us to love and care for those with HIV, not by forcing us, but motivating us. It has made a difference to our lives." 

Glynis Horning is a writer based in Durban. For more information about Mpilonhle, visit mpilonhle.org

Good News



Charlize Theron, who co-sponsors the project, visits the area often.

- The HIV infection rate was 7,4 percent.
→ There was no access to testing.
→ Most learners had no access to computers.
→ Learners in schools rarely accessed health-care services.
→ Sanitation was often inadequate, and many schools had no sports facilities.

BEFORE MPILONHLE

The innovative programme has drawn great interest from the community.

AFTER MPILONHLE

- Infection rate decreased to 4,5 percent.
→ The testing rate is 74 percent.
→ More than 10,000 learners are getting computer training.
→ The schools are reached by professional nurses and social workers.
→ Four of the schools have sports facilities and clean water, through CTAOP.