
A Commonwealth Partnership: Hampton and Piggs Peak

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In 2005, a native of Swaziland visited the town of Hampton, New Brunswick and spoke about the AIDS epidemic. The citizens of Hampton decided to help and got involved. They established a partnership with Piggs Peak, Swaziland to help this African community. Through the tremendous support of this small town of 4,000 citizens, Hampton has raised money to keep eighty students in school while supporting many other community projects in Piggs Peak. This article looks at the Hampton project and the role a local Member of the Legislature has played in developing this partnership.



In 2004 Canada hosted the CPA Conference; an internationally attended gathering of Commonwealth nations. I was Speaker of the New Brunswick Legislature at that time and felt very privileged to attend.

I saw a young African man standing by himself in the hotel lobby, looking at his agenda. I walked over, introduced myself and discovered he was a new MP from Swaziland and his name was Prince Mphiwa. Over the next few days of attending events and excursions together, we became friends.

The Kingdom of Swaziland is a small country; a little over 17,000 square km, with a population of about 1.1 million. It is independent, with a fully autonomous government. The Swazi people comprise a single tribe made up of several clans who speak Siswati and English. The Swazi are a proud, peace-loving people with happy personalities and a keen sense of humour. It is also a country with the highest percentage of people in the world infected by HIV/AIDS.

On another occasion Prince Mphiwa had the opportunity to come back to Canada to learn about establishing legislative committees. Swaziland had

just re-written their constitution and the parliament was evolving into a more effective legislative branch. I suggested he should visit New Brunswick and I could tour him through the province, as well as Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Through the beauty of October, we drove throughout the Maritime Provinces; experiencing the hospitality we are famous for.

This was the beginning of a friendship that opened my eyes to the plight of a generation, an entire world away. It never occurred to me how much of an impact it would have on my life, nor the path it would steer me to. What I also did not know was how generously involved my community of Hampton, NB, had already become.

The Starfish Program

Our town is known for its humanitarian attitudes and activities. Hampton is the home of John Peters Humphrey, who drafted the United Nations Charter of Human rights. Groups in this town have won the Human Right Award twice in the last ten years.

Over the years the relationship between Hampton and Piggs Peak has grown and been strengthened through a number of visits between residents of our respective communities. I have visited there five times now, and help as the Swazi liaison, working on site with the people we support.

On my first visit to Swaziland, I was asked by our Hampton chairman to visit Fundukuwela High school to officially open a project that was brought to life at the school by two Hampton teachers. When I returned home I realized that I needed to get involved as a

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member of the partnership committee. As a result of widening connections and new friendships, I knew I would be visiting Swaziland more often. I travel, at my own expense, to my favorite destination as a working visit and stay with friends. It is much more personally rewarding, rejuvenating and energizing than a cruise or following my Canadian friends south.

As a result, many Hampton residents, including students from our local schools, have undertaken individual sponsorship of a Swazi student through our Starfish Program; an idea that we began last year to help us meet our growing need for financial support.

We named this program after the 'starfish' story.

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy pick something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, "What are you doing?"

The youth replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die."

"Son," the man replied, "Don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't possibly make a difference."

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said, "I made a difference for that one."

The mission of our Hampton-Piggs Peak Partnership seeks to connect our communities in order to reduce the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS in Swaziland by providing help, hope and opportunity for a better future. Like the boy throwing back the starfish, we will do it one person at a time.

One of our major endeavours is providing school fees for students in the Piggs Peak area. All of these students have an ambition to attend university or college, and to take up a profession. This is possible for some if they achieve high marks on external exams. If accepted, the state pays tuition with a living allowance. How ironic when normal school can only be accessed if you pay the fees and buy the uniform.

From a world away we can assist eighty students with school fees and uniforms; children who will hopefully grow to be responsible and contributing members of Swazi society. Help to these unfortunate young people is a two way street. Both sides are winners.

Those of us who have visited Piggs Peak have seen the devastation caused by the rampant spread of HIV/AIDS. Families of orphans are being raised by elderly grandmothers; dying parents are being cared for by their children; unemployment and a cloud of hopelessness hangs over youth. Seeing this compels us to try to help.



With students of Fundukuwela High School looking at the new fund raiser calendar for the Hampton - Piggs Peak Partnership Project.

AIDS is the most significant cause of death in Africa. Swaziland has the highest percentage of incidence of AIDS in the world. A baby born in Swaziland has a life expectancy of thirty-two to thirty-six years. This is the lowest life expectancy of any country, and hard to imagine for us in Canada.

We are making a difference. I have been witness to change and have seen the results achieved because of caring relationships.

Personal Rewards

Roméo Dallaire gave advice concerning three major challenges if we are to accept our responsibilities beyond our borders. They involve major steps forward in the reduction of AIDS, in advancement of human relationships, both within African countries and among all nations. These very much apply to Swaziland.

1. Empowering women
2. Education of Children
3. Mutual Respect

We have a duty and a role beyond our country and our relative luxury. Indifference becomes unacceptable.

Some of these ideals, as well as my love of Swaziland and its people, keep me focused on the bigger picture. My life is enriched by my close friends in this country and by the mutual love and support I share with my extended family of young Swazis.

Marion Wright Edelman said, "I was taught that the world had a lot of problems; that I could struggle and change them; that intellectual and material gifts brought the privilege and responsibility of sharing with others less fortunate; and that service is the rent

each of us pays for living – the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time or after you have reached your personal goals.”

All the work is done on a volunteer basis but this project has allowed me the privilege of being involved and helping people in a small African country. This is a life-changing experience. (Although time adds years to my life, this adds life to my years.)

Examples of what can be done

Ghandi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world. In a gentle way, you can shake the world.” Let me conclude with some typical problems encountered in Swaziland and what we can do to help our fellow citizens.

Imagine you are a seventeen year old, young man. Your father left you and your family behind, before you were born, Your Mother died five years ago and is buried under a heap of rocks at the end of the garden. Your Grandmother used her small pension to keep you in school and you achieve high marks in your studies. The first week of your Form 4 (Grade 11) year you are sent home because you cannot afford to pay the school fees and you do not have any prospects of getting money. There is no money for food; you and your two siblings live on a homestead without electricity or running water. There are days it rains so hard you cannot light a fire. Your only clothing is pieces of a second-hand school uniform, which is badly worn. You fear for the future and you lie awake at night wondering, “How can I live? What can I do?”

Fortunately, for Sikelela (which means Blessed) a compassionate teacher who saw his potential suggested he come to see me. This was in January, 2010 and I was on my third visit to Swaziland. It was my last day there before returning to Canada. Sikelela introduced himself to me and I was so struck by the plight of this young man I added him to our Hampton Starfish Program that day. We went shopping for a new pair of shoes and uniform. There had not been time to find out too much of his background but as we corresponded during the next year he related his story of survival.

I returned to Swaziland in November, 2010. This time I was able to spend more time with Sikelela and we visited his homestead. His letters had not prepared me for his way of life. No food, no clothing (other than the school uniform I had bought him), no mattress, blankets or pillow. He slept on a straw mat on the hard ground. I took him shopping again and things looked better. We bought a large bag of good seeds for growing maize and some fertilizer to capture the beginning of the growing season. His crop



Mr. Harrison with four of the boys he has sponsored. They are wearing NB Legislature T-Shirts.

is doing well, which means food for the winter months (June – August). I realized, then, that I would ‘adopt’ (sponsor) Sikelala. I found a way to send him funds every month. When he turns eighteen, he will be able to open his own bank account.

Bongani is twenty-three years old in Form 5 (Grade 12). He was unable to stay in school every year for lack of money. He looked after his dying father, and provided food for his siblings. His mother had left him, his father and three siblings when he was very young. She had only, recently, returned since the death of his father. There had been many occasions when they would go for days without food. I also met Bongani at the end of my January, 2010 visit. Our Hampton sponsored students in Fundukuwela High School selected him as their spokesman.

During the year we exchanged many handwritten letters that created a father-son bond. Like Sikelela, he has become part of my extended Swazi family.

Lewis is 19. Two years ago, he became the first student I sponsored. He and three others; Dumsani, 23; Mfanzile, 20; and Thokozani, 18; have become part of my Swazi family and each has their own story.

Whenever I provide help to a student, I try to follow it up at a personal level. These young people need emotional support; they need to know someone cares. They are as starved for love and caring attention as they are for food.

Other examples and more information about this project can be found on our website at www.hamptonpiggspeak.ca