

The hearts of Africa

Generous Victorians are helping residents create a culture of hope in flood-wracked Mozambique

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After a long, hot afternoon visiting palliative care AIDS patients in mud huts around the town of Sena, Mozambique, Perpetua Alfazema and I walked home along a dusty red dirt road at dusk.

What inspired the one-time refugee from the area to return after a comparatively cushy life in Victoria for more than 20 years surprises me.

"Shivon, she inspired me," she said about Shivon Robinsong, the founder of Victoria's Gettin' Higher Choir. Robinsong has helped Alfazema, 41, and her husband, Joseph, 56, raise funds for their struggling homeland since 1997.

"I was a refugee. I should have known what it means to be compassionate because I suffered," Alfazema told me.

"I couldn't believe that people in Victoria wanted to help strangers."

Her story is one example of how Canadian connections in Africa are doing more than just giving handouts to the people who live there.

They are building bridges for lasting change.

I spent the better half of last month travelling in Africa as one of five young B.C. journalists to be awarded the Jack Webster Foundation's Seeing the World Through New Eyes Fellowship.

I travelled to Mozambique and Rwanda as part of the fellowship, which is organized in partnership with the Canadian International Development Agency.



CREDIT: Ray Smith, Times Colonist

Sarah Petrescu reports from Africa.

My only reservation in going to two of Africa's poorest and most problem-wracked countries was: "Who will care?"

What I found is that people do care, so much so they are willing to open their pocketbooks and drop their lives to help strangers in the midst of chaos.

My goal became to show where the help is going, to whom and what is really needed in these areas struck with a level of poverty and disease many of us cannot imagine.

This is how I found myself navigating through a flood disaster to find a village called Kapasseni, tucked away in the rural central Caia district, near the Zambezi River and the borders of Malawi and Zimbabwe.

It Takes a Village: How a Victoria refugee couple became heroes at home

Four flights in three days, a small bribe to regain lost luggage and a six-hour drive in a dilapidated Crown Victoria on a dark highway with potholes the size of wading pools concluded the "easy" part of my journey to Kapasseni, a village reborn with the help of caring Victorians.

It is where Joseph and Perpetua Alfazema - former Victoria refugees - are from, and now live.

At the best of times the tiny village is hell to get to. In the midst of one of the area's worst flood disasters, it's downright "by the luck of God," one aid worker warned.

Joseph live in Kapasseni until his teens, when hostility toward exploitive Portuguese colonizers turned the area into a war zone in the late 1960s. The conflict and the civil war that followed left the country a disaster - riddled with dangerous landmines and hollowed, useless infrastructure. Only in the last few years has Mozambique made somewhat of a comeback - with stronger democratic governing, economic reform and international investment.

The Alfazemas met in a refugee camp in Kenya and fell in love. When Joseph came to Victoria in the early '80s -- sponsored by a local Lutheran church -- he saved to send for Perpetua and for a wedding.

The couple built a life here. Joseph worked in the kitchen at Chandler's Restaurant and in maintenance at Gorge Road Hospital for more than a decade. Perpetua worked as a janitor at City Hall and a nurse's aid at Royal Jubilee hospital -- leading her to nursing studies at Camosun College. They raised their children here -- Maza, 21, Rafael, 18, and Sara, 16 -- now studying in Edmonton.

The family's first visit back to Mozambique in 1998 changed their lives.

"It was in terrible condition," Joseph says. They walked eight hours through the bush to find the village in ruins, littered with landmines and the people demoralized. "Kids were just hanging around with nothing to do."

The chief asked the Alfazemas if their friends in Canada would help.

"We weren't sure if they would," Joseph says. They asked their church, anyway, and decided to put on a fundraising concert with their small Mozambican community choir. Shivon Robinsong came on board with the Getting' Higher Choir when the two groups met at Folkfest - both sang African songs. That first concert sold-out St. Andrew's Cathedral and raised \$11,000 to go back to Kapasseni and build the only school for local children. The Alfazemas, Robinsong and friends started the Kapasseni Project and the 300-person Gettin' Higher Choir became their biggest fundraiser. Each year they've raised around up to \$15,000 with guest performers like Ann Mortifee, Nelly Furtado and Beth Nielsen Chapman.

"That first concert changed all our lives," Robinsong told me.

They've since built a new school, a medical centre, started breakfast, music, eye care and HIV education programs. They have community gardens, a water pump and a grinding mill among other innovative projects - many started by Canadian friends.

"We found a new focus and so many friends wanting to help," Perpetua says. She decided to target her studies towards palliative care to help the many people dying of HIV/AIDS. Joseph enrolled in seminary college in St. Catherines, Ont., to help provide spiritual guidance.

In August 2006, Joseph and Perpetua Alfazema moved back to Mozambique -- to Sena, 22 kilometres from Kapasseni. Perpetua started Kuwangisana, a home-based care project for people -- mostly women -- living with AIDS, disease and poverty, using it as practicum experience for a social work diploma. It soon grew into a day program AIDS orphaned children and their grandparents. The Stephen Lewis Foundation and Medical Teams International are funders.

Joseph is a Lutheran minister on a three-year mission in the area.

They plan to use their time in Mozambique to help the community sustain and build on what all started in Kapasseni -- a village no one had heard of until it became the area's model of hope and success.

This is why I'm determined to get there. First stop: Flood zone.

Sena or Bust: A flood-zone safari

Like many places in Africa, transportation beyond the tourist beaten track is dismal. Roads - when there are some -- are puckered and falling apart. Buses are fume-spewing

mini-vans stuffed with bodies, human and animal. In Mozambique, vehicles often stop along the highway to pay a small bribe to crooked cops. Most people get around on bicycle or by foot.

"I'm really proud of you for trying," are not the words you want to hear from your guide and translator. "Most people would never come in a disaster."

Manuel Miandica, 28, is also director of the Mozambique Kapasseni Society board, a government certified AIDS/HIV educator and Perpetua's nephew. He spends the majority of his time traveling to villages to talk about the disease -- using theatre and music to connect with people.

"A lot of people think HIV is a curse because that's what the traditional doctors tell them ... The only way we can make a difference is through education. People have to find it in their own minds and feel it in their hearts," he says. We get to Caia at midnight. This is NGO central, where the disaster relief is co-ordinated. It is also the end of our paved road.

In the morning, we hitch a ride with one of the most active Mozambican aid organizations, Ecumenical Committee for Social Development (CEDES).

Manhica Filsberto and his team load our stuff into the back of their white pickup. They've agreed to try to get us to Sena - where Joseph and Perpetua live - but reports are the road is flooded and impassable.

"We'll have to go see for ourselves," Filsberto says. He wants to check on the flood-wrecked area and evacuee settlements along the way. He clutches blue ledger with names of 8,000 displaced people. More than 100,000 people have had to be resettled because of the flooding. 70 have died.

"The stagnant water is very bad. If there is not a quick response to sanitation we could have an outbreak of disease like cholera or malaria," he says.

Part of the problem is that annual flooding in Mozambique is man-controlled. Torrential rains in Zambia and Zimbabwe swell the Zambezi river. They open their dams and Malawi and Mozambique bear the brunt of the released water. In the Caia district, whenever the Kariba dam is opened -- often with little notice -- the area floods.

Flood preparedness has improved since 2000, when the country was hit with its worst floods and Cyclone Eline -- killing 800 people and destroying 90 per cent of farming land.

"When we talk about natural disasters and calamities, thank God for the little help that exists. But there has to be more help and better solutions," Filsberto says. "What is necessary, how we should do it, that's what keeps us up at night... It's not just evacuating people, it's helping them start a new life."

Sugar cane, farms and grass huts sit in low water that puddles the road. Children attend class on the balcony of their submerged school. We are several kilometers in land from the Zambezi. Some make use of the water - doing laundry and fishing with the blue mosquito nets supposed to protect them from Malaria.

"See what people do with international aid. They fish," Miandica laughs, as we bump along in the truck.

We stop at an evacuee settlement where CEDES is helping to build permanent houses. There are 900 people crammed into tiny huts, waiting.

"We try to unite the people, talk things out and send messages on a blackboard. This way they feel it is theirs," says project leader Inacio Bingala. "So when the rains stop they don't try to return home and start the cycle of problems all over again."

Twenty kilometers from our destination we reach a sprawling lake with women washing and children playing at the shore.

"This is the road to Sena," says Miandica. "Do you want swim or walk?"

On cue, a gaggle of boys stumble out of the bush yielding machetes and grins. They've helped clear a road to Sena along the old colonial railway.

Kuwangisana: AIDS orphans and grandparents

Dozens of children in brown and yellow uniforms rush the opening gates of Kuwangisana clapping and singing in the Sena language.

"They made a song for you," Miandica tells me. "They're saying 'One Sara has left us but another has come,'" a reference to the Alfazemas' youngest daughter who returned to Canada a few days before.

"We've been waiting for you," Perpetua greets us, Joseph, her staff and a group of grandparents close behind. Sena, like much of AIDS-affected Africa, is full of grandparents left to care for orphans. They meet at Kuwangisana weekly to help each other and socialize. Kuwangisana means "For the better health and well-being of all."

"They do so much for the kids and really support each other," Perpetua says.

We gather in the last building standing in the destruction of recent wild weather - where children sing and take lessons. They get additional shade from two large Boab trees, though one is full of killer bees.

But there's a lot in the works, including a foundation for what will be the main building - a proper medical room, offices, education room and interfaith chapel.

"Everything here has Victoria people behind it -- every new idea, every plant," Perpetua says as we sit with the crowd.

Two sad looking toddlers make their way to the Alfazemas' laps.

"We have three kids, but two more we've adopted in spirit," Perpetua says. The little girl, Nhuo, used to wander around people's houses as at dinnertime and beg for food. Neighbors brought her to Kuwangisana, dehydrated and in pain with a brutal hemorrhoid. "We didn't think she'd live."

She thinks the little boy, Victor, is about three. He was also brought to them with no known family.

"These kids have no love in their [foster] homes. The little they get is here. They come here on weekends because it's the only food they'll eat," Perpetua says. The floods destroyed the maize crops they hoped to use to feed the 200 orphans. What wasn't lost in the water is munched by a rogue hippopotamus who visits the gardens at night.

"We can hear him in there pigging out and having fun... They're very dangerous," Perpetua tells me.

Food supplies are dangerously low. Even worse, the World Food Program has yet to deliver on a promise to help. They'll have to find the funds, and food, elsewhere in their budget.

A feisty group of grandparents dance, clap and sing - though their songs are anything but upbeat.

"They're saying they have no food, no help and no hope for these kids," Miandica translates.

Ellen Manoa says she can't feed her grandkids Liza and Luo, even with a small farm.

"It is the biggest problem," she says. "At least they can come here now and are not always home alone."

Chasasa Aniva, "the funny grandma," entertains kids with songs that have a message.

"I talk to girls about playing with boys, staying away from sharp things," she says "I try to make everything humorous serious as well."

Francisco Bota invites us to the mud hut he shares with his wife and granddaughters Zefa, 13, and Machemi, 12, who is deaf.

His son Joseph died four years ago from AIDS, not long after the girls' mother. "Their father owned his own little shop. Life was better when their parents were living and

responsible for them," Bota tells us. Kuwangisana helps. "At least I know being part of this group, if I die tomorrow the girls are in safe hands."

A woman comes up to Perpetua to tell her she thinks she has AIDS and needs help. Perpetua asks her to come speak to her in private later.

"When we first started the palliative care program we had to beg people to get tested and come forward. They were in denial and ashamed," she says. Increased awareness about HIV and patients' improving health on the free anti-retroviral drug program changed that. "Now they are coming to us."

Kuwangisana: Canadian palliative care model helps

Perpetua Alfazema modeled the Kuwangisana home-based care program on palliative care experience in Victoria and St. Catherine's, Ont. She saw no reason why the practice used in hospitals and homes to help cancer and terminally-ill patients die gracefully and pain-free could not also be used in AIDS-plagued Africa. In Sena, the rate of HIV infection is almost 20 per cent.

"It's still hard to get the men tested," Perpetua says. The program's 12 volunteers - or "activists," as she calls them - ride bicycles stocked with medical kits. They visit hundreds of patients each week, keeping tabs on medications, doctor's appointments, food intake and providing emotional support. "Every household is touched by AIDS. Everyone has suffered from it."

We walk to see Raim Miquetaio, 19, who has AIDS and advanced cancer. She lays on a mat in the shade with her emaciated infant son.

"I'm feeling better," she says, just back from treatment in Beira on a breast tumour the size of a watermelon. She lifts her top to show us her left breast, shriveled and scarred. "She breastfeeds with the other one," her sister says.

Perpetua tells me about a neighbour, Antonia Simao, who died the night before.

"She was doing fine until a traditional healer told her to stop taking the ARVs," she says. "To die like that woman - like a dog. Rolling around, vomiting, soiling herself. It is not humane, not right."

We meet Angistina Simbe lying half-naked in front of her house. She is in pain and can't eat or take meds. She lifts a bag of yellow pills and tells Perpetua she'll make sure someone lets them know when she dies.

"Tell her she will get better. Encourage her," one of the volunteer says.

"When you are in pain you say a lot of things," Perpetua responds. "I'll tell her I'll send the technician."

There is no doctor in Sena - only a lab technician who can do little more than dress minor wounds at a hospital medieval in medical standards.

"I used to read about AIDS in Africa, thinking it was just white people making a big deal of it. Now I see it and think it is way underreported," Perpetua says. "You've seen the sad stories, now it's time to see some good. I've left that for last."

We wind past huts and children that could star in a World Vision infommercial -- bloated bellies and festering treatable infections -- but they still play and laugh.

Maria Manuel, a slight, pretty woman in her early twenties, comes out of her home to greet us.

"I can stand now and do some work," she says. She thinks she got HIV from her husband who died without being tested. When she was bed ridden, friends told her to contact Kuwangisana. The anti-retrovirals helped immediately.

"I connected with friends nearby who also have HIV. They understand," she says. "Most of the time we talk, remind each other of dates to go to the hospital to get medication and what the side effects are. I'm really feeling things have improved and hoping it will stay like that for me."

We meet another success story on the trail. Fina Dave, in her late 40s, carries basin of water on her head.

"People used to fetch water for me when I was too sick. Now I'm feeling better and fetching water for someone else in the same situation," she tells us.

"She is a good news story," Perpetua says. "She could hardly move she was so sick but we got her food and on medication - her husband too. She had to fight him. He was refusing to get tested and threatening to divorce - said she was unfaithful... Now they are in marriage counseling."

When Dave has a large harvest she brings greens for the children at Kuwangisana.

"That's how the spirit of things changes when you help people -- they help people too," Perpetua says. "It is very Canadian."

Journey to Kapasseni: The village reborn through Victorians

When Perpetua Alfazema sets her mind to something, there is no room for failure or backing out. This how I found myself riding double on the rat-trap of a bicycle to Kapasseni village, a three-hour trek each way through rough trails and hills.

The floods had washed out the main roads for weeks.



"I usually walk and that takes six hours," Miandica says as we take off with the Alfazemas and our bike taxi drivers. "I was up to my neck in water."

We zoom through cornfields, bells ringing to warn people and goats on the path. Bare-breasted women carry babies on their backs as they work and say "Boa tarde" as we pass -- "Good afternoon" in Portuguese.

We stop at one of the dozens of churches Joseph leads in the area. About 40 families come to the congregation where they've built a church with bamboo.

"I didn't come here to make people different," Joseph tells me. "But I wanted to offer spiritual guidance and an alternative to the traditional religion, which often says it is their fault bad things happen like AIDS and poverty."

As we get closer to Kapasseni, a magical quality takes over the route. Kids in school uniforms with book bags laugh and chat. One little boy hitches a ride on our handlebars.

When we reach the clearing of Kapasseni it has a different feel than anywhere else I've been in Mozambique: It is clean, safe, sane.

Several cement buildings make up the compound: A school-room, teacher's quarters, a mill house, radio e-mail room and medical centre among them.

Under the shade of a towering Masau tree, children play the valimba in a music lesson.

Teacher Adelina Simbe Bedhame says the kids, "like Portuguese, history and science."

Some students walk two hours to get to school. It's hard to tell how big Kapasseni is. The sprawling spatter of hut compounds is estimated at a population of 9,000.

"None of this was here when we came. Everything here has a Canadian story behind it. Even look at the flowers we planted," Perpetua says, pointing out the homage to Victoria's well-manicured landscape.

The success of Kapasseni is in the details: Small actions and stories over the years that make it that much better of a community to live and learn from.

There are the school desks donated by the Canadian High Commission, the water pump sponsored by the Lutheran Church, a grinding mill bought with donations from Victorians and supplies from people St. Catherine's sent in a shipping container - now being used as Sena's first library.

The stories are heart-warming: In 2003, Getting' Higher Choir Co-director Denis Donnelly raised thousands for a reforestation program in memory of his late wife who was an environmentalist.

Last year, choir member Sabine Laubental raised funds for the eye care program because she herself was faced with the progressive loss of her sight. Salt Spring Island resident Gary Brooks visits Kapasseni regularly.

Robinsong researched the nutritious value of native plants to make super-porridge for a breakfast program.

Even the midwife at the health clinic wears one of Perpetua's old nursing uniforms.

A letter in the Times Colonist in 2001 plead for Victorians to help seven-year-old Nijira Eusebio - who had such a severe cleft palate, "He looked like a monster, with a tooth through his nose," Perpetua says. The pleas were answered with \$6000 in donations and another \$3,000 from Transforming Faces Worldwide. The boy and his mother went to South Africa for facial reconstruction surgery. "He returned a hero. He's a normal kid here now."

Kapasseni is flourishing but not in the clear. Natural disasters threaten food supplies and homes. Many children in the area are unable to attend school or afford uniforms. And HIV/AIDS education is now critical as the area connects more with the outside world.

But the Alfazemas, their Canadian and Mozambican comrades, are determined to make sure the community flourishes long after they return Canada.

"It was risky for us to come here this long - financially and physically - but how could we not?" Perpetua says as we leave Kapasseni. Their next mission is to secure food for the hundreds of orphans that depend on them. If the World Food Program or emergency funding doesn't come through, the new building might have to wait.

"We do this one step at a time," she says. "I don't believe we can 'Make Poverty History,' like that campaign says. But we can lessen poverty. The way is not hard."

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Sarah Petrescu traveled to Africa to report for the Times Colonist as a winner of The Jack Webster Foundation of Journalism Seeing the World Through New Eyes fellowship - a partnership with the Canadian International Development Agency