

The Strong Recorders ask the questions

by Sue Valentine

My name is Prettygirl, do you want to know me? I live at Ingwavuma. In my family I live with my grandfather and grandmother, Philasande (her cousin) and Nomvula (her sister). I am 11 years old. The name of my school is Okhayeni Primary School...

These were the first English words, spoken into the microphone by a round-faced, chubby, young girl with an infectious giggle who was always in the thick of the ball games that interspersed our

one'. Now I am like mother to Nomvula because I looking after Nomvula and I wash her clothes and I cook food for Nomvula...

Things I like to do. I like to read and play ball. The message I want to tell to you, is take care of yourself. Goodbye.

Prettygirl is one of nine children from the Ingwavuma district who have since named themselves "Abaqophi basOkhayeni Abaqinile" (the Okhayeni Strong Recorders) following a week-long radio training course that taught them basic interviewing skills and the principles of sound recording.

The project, initiated by the Helen Meintjes of



Pictures by Helen Meintjes, Gabriel Urgoiti and Prettygirl



first radio training with a group of nine children in Ingwavuma, in the far north-east of South Africa in January 2005.

As her matter-of-fact introduction suggests, Prettygirl has no parents. Her father is a distant memory, but her mother died of an Aids-related illness a few years ago. Unlike many other parents she told her daughter about her illness, charging Prettygirl with the responsibility for taking care of her younger sister, Nomvula – a commitment that Prettygirl honours diligently as her recording makes clear. What is equally clear and equally matter-of-fact is the adult role she also shoulders:

In the morning I get up at 4 o'clock and I sweep the yard. And then I go to the tap and I fetch water and I come back to home and I clean in dining room.... In afternoon when I come back from school I go to the tap and then I come back to home and I take the pots to cook. I cook everyday for my grandmother and grandfather... The food that I like is rice and beans...

Nomvula is very special to me because when my mother was sick and she say to me, 'Please looking after Nomvula because Nomvula is the small

the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town and consultants Gabriel Urgoiti and Sue Valentine was born from a desire to allow children to speak for themselves about what it is like growing up in the context of HIV/Aids. From there the partnership developed with the Ingwavuma-based Zisize Educational Trust and Okhayeni Primary School.

In summer Ingwavuma is humid and hot. Malaria is rife. Winters can be bitterly cold. Nguni cattle rule the pot-holed roads, with taxis and bak-kies accounting for most of the remaining traffic. Small towers dot the flat landscape like low-rise sentry posts marking the community's erratically-effective water pumps. In the mornings and afternoons a daily chore for most children is to queue with wheelbarrows and plastic containers which spill their load as they stagger home.

Poverty in Ingwavuma is acute. Most households are poor, regardless of whether they are directly affected by HIV or not. But the reality is that Aids is no stranger to households in KwaZulu-Natal, the epicentre of South Africa's HIV/Aids pandemic. In northern KZN, where there is little work

and men, in particular, leave to find work in the province's towns and cities, the risk of HIV becomes that much higher.

The statistics are all too familiar, as are the weekly funerals. The Actuarial Society of South Africa estimates that 1.54 million people in KZN are HIV-positive and that 111 000 people will die in the province in 2006. Besides the trauma this causes for families, the loss of adult individuals in what should be their prime years has significant consequences for households' economies – how food, transport, clothing, school fees, textbooks, uniforms are paid for – and what kind of future families can look forward to.

Reports on the Aids pandemic often highlight the "problem" of "orphans and vulnerable children". But as with most shorthand, this phrase blurs the details that distinguish individual lives. It lumps children together, defined by headlines as "innocent victims", essentially helpless and without a sense of agency.

The reality is, as always, more complex and the children's radio project seeks to capture how children perceive their lives and what are *their*

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concerns. Inspired by the work of US independent radio producer David Isay, who created the award-winning documentary "Ghetto Life 101" in collaboration with two Chicago youngsters in 1993, the Ingwavuma radio project gives children access to mini-disc recorders to describe their lives in their own way. This, in turn, gives listeners an inside glimpse into what it's like to be them.

An essential foundation for the work was to build a relationship of trust with the children who were chosen by staff at Okhayeni Primary School – a remarkable school that until four years ago held its classes under the trees. In her radio diary, 11-year-old Zama chose to interview the school principal Nokhukhanya Ndlovu – an interaction that provides insight into the teacher-learner relationship as well as some of challenges facing the school:

Good morning. I'm Zamadlomo. I'm on the way to school...

We are nearby Mam' Ndlovu's office... I see the office is full. I think she's busy there... Good day Mam'.

MAM' NDLOVU: Good day Zama...

ZAMA: What makes you like to be a manager of this school?

MAM' NDLOVU: I like to be a manager here because first of all, I love this place. Secondly, I love the learners. Thirdly, I am a teacher by profession. Right now I have got about 319 learners who are enrolled here this year, 2005. There

are nine teachers.

ZAMA: How is it to be a manager?

MAM' NDLOVU: Ah, it's challenging... Here are learners from Grade R up to Grade 7, some of them have a number of problems. There are those that are staying with their grannies; those staying with their single parents; staying with both parents but unemployed. The majority of the learners are from homes where there is just [a] mother or father, some of them have died because of HIV and Aids, some of them have died because of malaria... others of car accidents. So... the learners have problems. Problems of hunger; they come without food in their stomachs... it is difficult for them to concentrate in class because of the number of problems that they come to class with.

ZAMA: What [has] this school done about the children that come to school without food?

MAM' NDLOVU: The Department [of Education] is providing them with food from Monday to Friday. All learners are getting food... here at school on a Saturday and Sunday and during holidays... My dream about the school is that I would love to see Okhayeni being the big school in a sense that it has more learners, and in a sense that it has some other subjects that are offered here at school... I'm looking forward to seeing Okhayeni having an administration block... a computer room, home economics room, a kitchen, a sewing room... I would love to see them happening here...

ZAMA: And your school entered the NS [Natural Science] competition?

MAM' NDLOVU: Oh yes, Zama. Last year for instance we entered the Natural Science competition and learners performed very well. We've got one learner who is doing Grade 8 this year who got a bursary from that competition. That was wonderful.

ZAMA: How do you feel when you see your school entered into the NS competition and win?

MAM' NDLOVU: I feel good, wonderful! [Laughs]

Months before the radio workshop, a vitally important foundation phase was facilitated by Okhayeni teacher Bongekile Mngomezulu and Zisize Trust co-ordinator Bridget Walters, under the supervision of Helen Meintjes at the Children's Institute. Through a combination of games and exercises held after school, the children wrote and painted aspects of their worlds, describing their happiest and saddest moments or important people in their lives. This existing relationship created the platform on which, in the space of seven short days, we could launch the radio project and begin working with the children to create audio diaries.

To say that the children were eager to get their hands on the microphone and recorder is to understate their enthusiasm. They absorbed the essence of radio – of "seeing with your ears" – and in no time learned how to hold a microphone, which buttons on the mini-disc recorders to press and which to leave alone! After an initial shyness mixed with delight at hearing their own voices, we were hard-pressed to get them to relinquish their turn with the mini-disc recorder. Limited resources meant there was one mini-disc recorder for every three children.

The next stage of the training was to help the children identify the different people they might want to talk to in order to illustrate their stories, and what sounds to record to enrich the audio picture.

Almost invariably, those children who had lost a parent wanted to find out more about that parent, or about themselves when they were small. Within the group, one child had lost both parents and three others had lost one parent. Of the remaining five, although both parents were alive, fathers were often absent working in Durban, Pietermaritzburg or Johannesburg.

Many media reports ignore the fact that more than 90% of children who have lost parents to Aids live with relatives. Prettygirl is one example, 10-year-old Lindokuhle is another. An important presence in Lindokuhle's life is his grandmother. The "licence" to ask questions given by being part of the radio project, and the distance and "protection" offered from the microphone in his hands, gave him the chance to interview his granny about his mum's death a year earlier.

Again, the interaction between the two speaks volumes about their relationship as well as the vital role the grandmother plays in supporting the household. Lindo spoke in isiZulu, this is a translation:

LINDO: Hello, my name is Lindokuhle... At home I live with father and granny and my three brothers and one sister... My mother left [died] when I was nine years old. We live well at home because granny gets a pension and my father has found work. [Thumping sound] We are now in the yard at home. Granny is here crushing mealies. Sawubona Gogo.

GOGO: Yebo.

LINDO: How are you Granny?

GOGO: I am fine.

LINDO: Granny, can you tell me how I got my name and also what it means?

GOGO: The name of this child is Khethani. His mother became pregnant and gave birth to him during [South Africa's first democratic] election time... We said he is Khethani [chosen], because he came out during the time of the elections.

LINDO: Gogo, did my mother not tell you what she was suffering from before she died?

GOGO: She was sick and coughing, her chest was sore, she had diarrhoea and vomiting and then she died, MaGumede, my daughter-in-law.

LINDO: How did you take the death of my mother?

GOGO: I took it very badly, and it is still painful in my spirit. It was very painful for me, the death of my daughter-in-law, who left orphans. I now look after these orphans because they have no mother.

LINDO: Gogo, how are you managing to raise us here at home?

GOGO: I struggle, I only get a little. I am raising them with the little that I have from the grant money.

LINDO: The death of my mother affected me badly, because perhaps at night when we were going to sleep, we would sleep without eating. I thought that if we still had our mother we would have eaten and that made me cry. Then when I heard people saying, like perhaps when we were playing, they would say, the dead one is watching her children, and then I would cry. When they talked about her it was as if I was seeing her right next to me. I was afraid to ask father about what mum had suffered from, and about her death.

The number of orphans (children under 18 who have lost one or both parents) is expected to rise from 3.4 million in 2005 to 4.6 million in 2013 (Actuarial Society of South Africa). But it is not enough to quote the numbers only, nor should reporting focus exclusively on doomsday scenarios.

Through allowing children to describe themselves and their lives in the course of making the radio programmes, a clear message emerged. Children *want* to be told what is happening around them and to be included in the grieving process. When parents and caregivers were given the chance to listen to the children's work, this was an important realisation that struck many of them.

While the absence of parents who have died is keenly felt, the children who took part in the radio project are much more than passive victims. They are eager to acquire skills and seize opportunities. As part of the Okhayeni Strong Recorders they are learning how to ask questions, to organise information and to assemble it in a logical and engaging way. An emerging partnership with the local community radio station (Maputaland Community Radio) offers an important outlet for children's voices to continue to be heard – be it on HIV/Aids or any other issues they choose to explore. ■

The radio training was conducted by Khopotso Bodibe, Gabriel Urgoiti and Sue Valentine. A CD of the project and the children's stories – in English and Zulu – is available from the Children's Institute. Contact Helen Meintjes: helenm@rmh.uct.ac.za

References

- Meintjes, H and Bray, R.** 2004. "But where are our moral heroes – An analysis of South African press reporting on children affected by HIV/Aids." *African Journal of Aids Research*, 4(3).