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In AIDS' wake, new family

The Monitor starts an occasional series on two families who reached out to AIDS orphans.

By Scott Baldauf, Staff Writer / September 26, 2007 at 12:00 am EDT

Tshipesong Township, South Africa

Until May 2005, Olga Thimbela's life was unremarkable. Like many housekeepers, she earned about 700 rand a month ($100), enough to buy groceries and clothes for her two young children and to support herself and her husband, Pontsho.

But on May 26, 2005, Olga's sister Nono – a mother of four – died of AIDS. Since there were no other relatives to take in Nono's children, Olga took them in herself, and her family doubled overnight. In June 2006, Olga's family grew again, when Olga's aunt – a mother of two – also died of AIDS.

Hundreds of thousands of families in South Africa have faced both the grief of losing relatives to AIDS and the daily demands of looking after those they leave behind. South Africa has more children orphaned by AIDS than any other country in the world, with some 2 million South Africans having died of AIDS, and 5.4 million living with HIV, according to UNAIDS. Demographers describe South Africa's population as an hourglass, with a large number of elderly on one end and a large number of children and youths at the other end. In the skinny middle are a diminishing number of young adults, who are dying at the rate of 1,000 a day from AIDS.

It is the loss of the most productive citizens – 71 percent of deaths among adults ages 15 to 49 are caused by AIDS – that could sap the energy of a young nation of some 47 million and an entire generation at a time when both should be coming into their own.

"I do a lot of stuff for my kids and my sister's kids because I didn't want to see these kids to go to eat in the dustbin or to go to steal," says Olga, her soft voice breaking into sobs in the bedroom she shares with Pontsho and her youngest son, Bokamoso. "Life is too difficult."

"I don't have a family now because of AIDS," she adds, gaining composure, "My sister is gone; it's AIDS. My auntie is gone; it's AIDS. That's why I took these kids to stay with me also. But I don't mind everything, I'm happy. I always say
that God will help us one day."

The burden for this looming population crisis falls primarily on the shoulders of the black and poor majority. But South Africa's black communities have at least one cultural resource to fall back on: the traditional African concept of ubuntu.

It's an obligation many Africans describe as automatic – as natural as offering water to a guest or a seat on the bus to an elderly person. Stanlake Samkange, the late African nationalist and journalist from Zimbabwe, said that among other things, ubuntu "means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life." But while ubuntu means that some of South Africa's most vulnerable citizens will have someone to look after them, it also means that families like Olga's stretch themselves to the limit.

Olga "is still very physically active, she can go out and find employment," says Sibongile Mpofu, the social worker who helped Olga get custody of her sister's children. But other South Africans, particularly the elderly, are not so fortunate.

"It is a burden for those grannies who cannot work anymore," says Ms. Mpofu, who works at Roodepoort Child Welfare Society. "It's a burden financially and emotionally to deal with the fact that ... these mothers are dying and they're leaving their children behind, and the government isn't doing anything about it."

Not surprisingly, Olga makes every penny count. In addition to her monthly salary, she receives 590 rand ($84) apiece for the three younger children of her late sister Nono. But even with the 1,400 rand ($200) that her husband gets from his new job as a security guard, the family's $552 a month is $55 per person per month, below the World Bank poverty line of $2 a day.

Olga's home, a four-room tin shack built on land bought by her late mother, was spacious for a family of four, but for a family of 10, it's cramped. The government electric company has extended wires into her neighborhood, but hasn't connected those wires to the homes. Water lines have reached her street, but Olga had to pay to have a spigot installed in her yard. Her family uses an outhouse in the backyard.

The day is long and begins early, as Olga and Elizabeth, her aunt's oldest daughter, bathe, dress, and feed the younger children before school. Weekdays, Pontsho stays at his workplace; on weekends, he provides discipline and encouragement.

Bullied as a child because she didn't have an education, Olga says she pushes her kids to study. "That's why I take these kids," she says, "that's why I push these kids.... I don't want these kids to be like me. I don't want these kids to grow up without education."

It's a hard life, but Olga says her decision to take her family's children hasn't
affected her relationship with Pontsho.

On the day her sister died, Olga gave him an escape clause. "I had to be honest," she recalls. "I told Pontsho if he doesn't love my sister's kids, it's better the marriage must end. And then Pontsho said to me, 'No, my love, don't say that, because you don't know inside my heart. I will love these kids like I love you and yours.'"

Pontsho laughs when he thinks of that day. "Our life now," he says, "it's getting up where we can control it now." By eating lower-cost staple food, such as ground corn paste, Olga and Pontsho can set aside a bit of money each month.

"What we have to know is, those kids, they must attend school, and after school they have to go to [high school], to go up to the university to be someone one day. We have to save money for them."

Olga's foster children know they have been given a second chance. After her mother's death, relatives "didn't love us, they just called us names," says Bulelwa, a seventh-grader and the youngest daughter of Olga's aunt. "If they cook, they don't give us food equal." But in Olga's home, "[W]hen I got here, [Olga], she give us equal food, she doesn't call us names. She treat us equal like her children."

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