

## Bettle Helps Hampton, Swazi Town Form Bond

By Trudy Kelly Forsythe

**HAMPTON** – When Hampton's Mark Bettle heard Thandi Nhlengethwa speak, he was moved, so moved he travelled to Swaziland to lay the groundwork for partnering two towns worlds apart.

Nhlengethwa is the executive director of the AIDS Information Support Centre in Swaziland, a non-governmental organization dedicated to the prevention and control of HIV infection.

She visited Hampton High School last October during a tour of Moncton and Saint John to spread word of the epidemic facing her country, a country with a 42.6 percent incident rate of AIDS in the adult population.

"I listened to what she had to say then afterwards I went to her and said I want to help," said Bettle, who was struck by the fact that the incidence of AIDS within Swaziland's heterosexual population could go from four

percent to 40 percent in a decade. "It could happen here.

"When Thandi spoke to the kids in Hampton, there were people from AIDS Saint John who also spoke and they told them there were other schools in this area where kids have AIDS," continued Bettle, recalling students were shocked to hear this.

Bettle did not stop with just an offer to help. He came up with a vision to partner a town in Swaziland with the town of Hampton.

Through the magic of email, he began laying the groundwork for a partnership between Hampton and Piggs Peak, a community of approximately 5,000 people.

"That's a size we can make a difference," said Bettle. "AIDS in Swaziland. AIDS in Africa. That's too much."

With his vision, Bettle approached his church – St. Paul's Presbyterian – Hampton High School and the

town council. All were supportive of the concept.

To turn the concept into reality, Bettle left Canada April 23 and spent over two weeks in Swaziland so he could see the problem and discover the community's needs first hand. Four of the days he spent in Piggs Peak visiting with the Church of Nazarene, Fundekewelah High School, the town's council and the business community.

Bettle said one of the greatest problems is distinguishing between poverty, AIDS and the high number of orphans.

"They perpetuate each other," said Bettle, who travelled with the executive director of AIDS Saint John, Julie Dingwell, and the executive director of SIDA – AIDS Moncton, Debby Warren. "The parents die from AIDS and the children are left in poverty as orphans."

It is with the children that Bettle believes the solution to the problem

lies. Swazi children have or get AIDS for three reasons.

“One, they are born with it,” said Bettle. “Two, they are subject to sexual abuse because they are orphans. Three, the young have nothing to do so they have sex before they understand the risks.”

One particular project addresses several issues.

“The Church of the Nazarene has five acres of land and a river runs behind it and they envision turning it into a vegetable garden,” said

Bettle. “The land needs to be irrigated and it needs to be fenced to protect it from cows, and they need money to buy seed and fertilizer.

“It’s a sustainable project that will bring children to the church, which will teach them abstinence, give them something to do and give them healthy food.”

So while Piggs Peak determines what it will cost to create the garden, Bettle said his next step is to mobilize the people in Hampton to find a solution, which will

likely involve fund-raising.

“The easiest way to help is to provide financing,” said Bettle. “It wouldn’t take much to make a big difference.”

A big difference, at least in the community of Piggs Peak, is what Bettle hopes to make.

“I’ve got some work to do, but I’m optimistic,” he said. “I think we can help.”

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## Some Facts About AIDS In Swaziland\*

- In 2004, an estimated 42.6 per cent of sexually active adults between the ages of 19 and 49 were infected with HIV. That’s up from 38.6 per cent in 2003, which placed Swaziland at the top of the world’s countries infected with AIDS.
- Fifty-six per cent of Swazis between 25 and 29 years of age were infected with HIV in 2004.
- The prevalence rate among pregnant women rose from 38.6 per cent in 2002 to 42.6 per cent in 2004.
- On the up side, HIV in 15 to 19 year olds declined from 32.5 per cent in 2002 to 29.3 per cent in 2004.

*\*As reported in the Ninth HIV Sentinel Survey, a survey carried out by the Swaziland National AIDS Task Force.*

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