





A mountain to climb

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People weren't listening to Aids consultant Thabang Skwambane. So he borrowed a bicycle, cycled from Joburg to Mount Kilimanjaro and climbed it. At the top he shouted. Now some of his message is hitting home. BY SUE GRANT-MARSHALL

THABANG SKWAMBANE'S MESSAGE IS direct: "If you do not look after your HIV-positive employees, their children will return one day to haunt you, to rob, rape, possibly even kill you."

His audiences, mostly of local CEOs, typically react in one of two ways. With most, the shutters on the eyes slam shut. Tight. The remaining few start doing something. Fast. Like Skwambane himself.

It was the Limpopo village toddler who got to him. The accountancy graduate was sitting in a hut, trying to establish how many Aids-orphaned kids there were in the village. He heard scratching at the door and when no one else moved, opened it to a twenty-month-old with a couple of chicken feet in a bowl. It was all she'd managed to scrounge that day.

The villagers shrugged. Her parents had died of Aids-related infections. The sooner she learnt to fend for herself, the better. "No child should be forced to be independent at twenty months," declared Skwambane angrily and formed the Lonely Road Foundation.

"That child came with me to the top of Kili, I carried her in my mind along with the other 1.2 million orphans who walk the same lonely, unsupported road with her." Unlike the orphans, Skwambane could have ditched his solitary ride and there were times during his ten-week trek when he was tempted to do just that.

He had no major sponsor for his consciousness-and fund-raising ride. He trained himself, lifting weights at home, climbing stairs at his block of flats, running around Zoo Lake. He learnt about nutrition from the doctors and

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dieticians at Kaelo Consulting, the HIV/Aids business he and two friends launched in 2004.

With possibly more guts than sense, he leapt onto his bike in June, carrying a pack that would have splintered a weaker back and set off alone on his six-country trip. Near Zeerust, a farmer with a huge *boep* invited Skwambane to toss his bike into his bakkie "cos we're out looking for a missing lion".

In Zimbabwe he was mugged at knifepoint. Skwambane told the thugs to bring on the guns, because they were robbing a South African, but they ran away instead. The shops, forced by law to slash their prices by half, had run out of bread, leaving him no option but to eat cake.

He was pushed off the road in Zambia by a massive hauler, tumbling five metres into a ditch. In Malawi, desperate for a roof to sleep under, he stopped at a police station where he was informed that only white cyclists were afforded that privilege.

He shared his tent with a snake, and when a wasp got into his shirt it landed at least ten vicious stings before Skwambane managed to rip off the garment. But it was his twelve-hour ride, scrunched up in the foetal position in his own gastro-enteritis-induced filth, on a Tanzanian peasant bus that came closest to ending his trip.

He could hardly walk, let alone ride, when the bus came lumbering along the dusty track and he squeezed into the last seat, where he cried quietly for hours. It was the kindness of dirt-poor villagers that enabled him to emerge with his dignity and purpose intact and eventually to summit Kili with several of his Kaelo colleagues, family and friends.

They've returned to a South Africa that is seemingly beginning to emerge from its Aids-denial slumber.

Discovery Health has appointed Kaelo as a service provider for its Wellness Days. This will see the consultancy doing 100 000 screenings next year, 50 000 of them coming from the 35 companies it has signed up since its inception. Clients include Standard Bank (Gauteng), Virgin Mobile and the Fuel Logistics Group.

Earlier this year, another health care consultancy, Pink Wellness, merged with Kaelo, bringing its directors to six and staff and contractors to close on 200. Skwambane likes to emphasise that Kaelo's not an NGO, nor solely devoted to HIV/Aids consulting. "It's an idea whose time has come. We're such an unwell country because we don't manage preventable chronic diseases."

We're fighting an enemy that's killing us.

Our obesity figures are the third highest in the world. We rate in the top five of adult HIV prevalence. The biggest killer of black South African males is hypertension, and the malignant version of it kills ninety percent of those diagnosed with it, within a year. It's an easily treatable condition if caught in time.

"Yet corporate South Africa's ignorance around health and wellness at work is horrendous," claims Skwambane. He can't understand why companies can't understand that a healthy workforce means better profits. Kaelo's pitch is simple. If it doesn't improve productivity, and therefore the bottom line, it wants to be fired. That's not happened yet.

One of the reasons could be that Kaelo tracks absenteeism figures, looking for health trends. In one company it found men taking sick leave for dysmenorrhea (an acutely female menstrual condition).

But it's Aids-related deaths and the orphans and vulnerable children left in its wake that incense Skwambane. He compares consultancies like Kaelo to the freedom fighters under apartheid. "We're fighting an enemy that's killing us. More people have died from Aids in a short period of time than have ever died from a single cause in the history of South Africa."

He estimates that within the next five years 1 600 people a day will be dying from Aids – with an incalculable social impact on the country. It's been estimated South Africa has 200 000 child prostitutes. There are at least 60 000 child-headed households. These children all had parents once, and many of those parents had jobs. What would you do if you were a starving child with siblings to support? That's the question that haunts Skwambane. **M**

*Sue Grant-Marshall is a freelance writer
and a seriously nice lady.*



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