



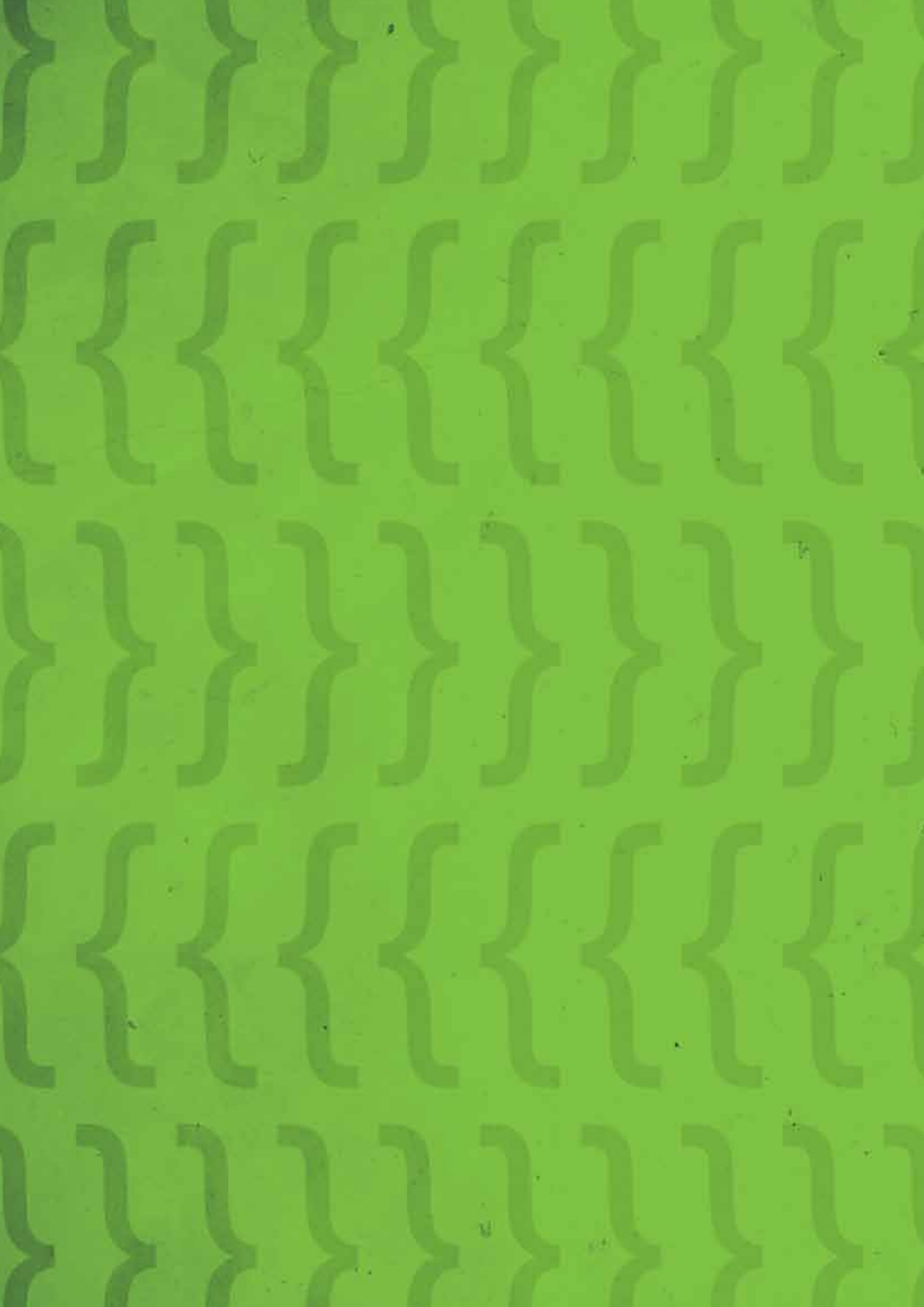
Case Study Number 10

## They made me brave

Reflections on women in leadership at  
CHoiCe Trust (CHoiCe) and the HIV/AIDS  
Prevention Group (HAPG)

[www.oxfam.org.au](http://www.oxfam.org.au)







THEY MADE ME

**BRAVE**

*Reflections on women in leadership at CHoiCe Trust (CHoiCe)  
and the HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG)*

INTRODUCTION  
.....

IN  
**CONTEXT**  
.....

} PAGE 04

①

INTERVIEW WITH  
.....

PUMLA  
**MABIZELA**  
.....

PAGE 06 }

②

CECILE  
**MANHAEVE**  
.....

} PAGE 09

③

LYDIA  
**POLE**  
.....

PAGE 14 }

④

HILARIA  
**SIMON**  
.....

} PAGE 16

5

PAGE 20

THABISILE  
KHUMALO

.....

6

REBECCA  
MALULEKE

.....

PAGE 22

7

PAGE 26

SUSANNAH  
COLE  
HAMILTON

.....

THE

.....

WRITER'S  
REFLECTIONS

.....

PAGE 28

COMING

.....

PAGE 30

FULL  
CIRCLE

.....

INTRODUCTION  
.....  
**IN  
CONTEXT**  
.....

*"In every community there is work to be done.  
In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In  
every heart there is the power to do it."*

MARRIANE WILLIAMSON

## The Australian Partnerships with African Communities

The Australian Partnerships with African Communities (APAC) was initially designed as a five-year partnership between the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and Australian non-government organisations, including Oxfam Australia. The program was extended to a sixth year of funding, and concluded in 2010.

APAC's aim was to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development in targeted countries in southern and eastern Africa. The program involved three sectors: food security, communicable diseases (including HIV and AIDS), and water and sanitation.

This document came out of a brief from Oxfam to "collect and publish the stories of leadership emerging from the program and is intended to build on insights into successful leadership models in development"; in this instance, women in development. CHoiCe Trust (CHoiCe) and HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG), the organisations which participated in this process, are both run by women.

## The process

The process involved interviews with Cecile Manhaeve, Lydia Pole, Hilaria Simon and Thabisile

Khumalo of HAPG; Rebecca Maluleke and Susannah Cole Hamilton of CHoiCe; and Pumla Mabizela, from Oxfam.

The primary mandate of the writer was to explore leadership styles and how they have worked (through stories, anecdotes, experiences, applications) in HAPG and CHoiCe. Gender is an important aspect of APAC's design, and given that women play a significant role in both programs, it was important to consider this perspective in the documentation process.

## The organisations

Both CHoiCe and HAPG are based in Limpopo, South Africa's northernmost province, bordering Botswana to the west, Zimbabwe to the north and Mozambique to the east.

Bela Bela (previously called Warmbaths), in which HAPG is located, is a rural town with about 63,000 inhabitants. When HAPG was started in 1996, there was a high mortality rate due to AIDS, which spread because of factors such as ignorance, political apathy, traditional beliefs and drug abuse.

Vingerkraal was originally a community made up primarily of Namibian people, many of whom were



linked to Koevoet<sup>1</sup>, put their money together and bought a farm in the Mabula area, 45km outside Bela Bela. Because of a lack of access to water and other amenities in this area, some families moved and become part of the Masakhane settlement, which is roughly 30km from Bela Bela.

Tzaneen, where CHoiCe is based, is the second largest municipality in Limpopo, and faces the challenges of HIV (which had a prevalence rate of about 21% in 2007/8), AIDS, Tuberculosis (TB), malaria and an unemployment rate of about 51%<sup>2</sup>.

## HAPG

HAPG conducts awareness campaigns around HIV and AIDS, offers adherence counselling, home based care, support for orphaned and vulnerable children, support groups for people living with HIV, and adherence mentoring. HAPG successfully ran a wellness clinic<sup>3</sup> for many years. After funding for this was stopped, the government took over running the clinic. HAPG is in the process of becoming involved

with the wellness clinic again, after negotiations with the Department of Health in the province.

Cecile Manhaeve is the Director of HAPG; Lydia Pole is General Coordinator; Hilaria Simon is the Team Leader for Vingerkraal and Masakhane; Thabisile Khumalo is a person who receives support from HAPG.

## CHoiCe

CHoiCe provides mentoring, support and training to community based organisations (CBOs). Support is provided around prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS, other sexually transmitted infections and TB, and includes organisational development support, community-based health workers' support, networking meetings, and training in basic health and home-based care skills.

Rebecca Maluleke is the Training Program Coordinator and is also involved in work on farms. Susannah Cole Hamilton is Chair of the Board of CHoiCe Trust.

<sup>1</sup> Koevoet (Afrikaans for crowbar), officially known as the "South West Africa Police Counter-Insurgency Unit" (SWAPOL-COIN), and also known as "Operation K", was an elite police counter insurgency unit in South-West Africa (now Namibia) during the 1970s and 1980s. (Source: [www.koevoet.webklijk.nl](http://www.koevoet.webklijk.nl))

<sup>2</sup> Source: Mopani District Municipality Integrated Development Plan 2007/8

<sup>3</sup> The wellness clinic team offers assessment and clinical care by an experienced physician for all registered HIV patients. Antiretroviral treatment is available and administered after individualised adherence training. (Source: HAPG website: [www.hapg.org.za](http://www.hapg.org.za))



{ P U M L A  
M A B I Z E L A

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INTERVIEW WITH

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P U M L A  
M A B I Z E L A

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## What, in your opinion, makes a good leader?

Is there someone born a leader, I wonder? I think people make you a leader and they grow you to become a good leader; and then it's up to you to embrace and enhance your skills around being a good leader.

Listening is most important; and the skill of not forcing yourself onto people, but walking with them in whatever processes you are taking. The ability to learn from other people and acknowledge their contribution to your becoming a better leader is important too.

To be someone that people are comfortable to come to when there is a problem; and then you look together in trying to solve it.

A good leader is someone who is able to humble themselves; if they make a mistake, they should be able to acknowledge this.

Someone who has backbone; if you have taken a position and you believe it is the right position, that it won't harm others, and is good for that moment.

And while people are growing you, you also have to grow people; you need to receive and give; it's a two way thing.

A leader is someone who is willing to learn and to take criticism.

And, finally, the thing we most often overlook: a smile. Leaders need to be approachable. It's hard to maintain this but it is something you have to strive towards.

## Do you see yourself as a leader?

All those things I have said just now, I would like to have those qualities and work towards them. I have heard people say they like working with me and there are things people say that tell me I have some leadership qualities in me.

I am a leader that doesn't take decisions alone. I like to find out what others think and get consensus if possible. At the same time, I do take a stand sometimes, and I believe that is equally important.

A leader has to think critically and voice what matters; and I think I have that skill in me.

## You are a senior person in your workplace, so there is a reason for this...?

I think this decision was made because of my working experience with partners. When it comes to development, I believe that people on the ground are the best placed to make decisions. I value the work that is being done on the ground and respect the people doing it.

I like to see partnerships working between and within communities, with organisations there to help them, and together creating a better life.

My position allows me to build and maintain those relationships. I believe that when I go into an organisation, I don't go in there as "this person from Oxfam". I go as me, and open up and learn from what people are saying. I also think it is important to say what I am thinking and share my knowledge with organisations. So, for that moment that you are there, you need to be part of that culture. I find that makes things so much easier, and people open up and are willing to share.

It is my interest to ensure that the work that is promised is delivered properly.

## Do you think being a woman works in your favour in this work?

I have to think about that. I don't remember an instance where I felt belittled, I guess because most of the organisations we work with are run by women, and it is fortunate that these women are open-minded and are there to serve.

The organisations I work with are run by people who believe in systems and in an organised way of working; and I love to work in an organised atmosphere, with people who have energy and enthusiasm about the work they do.

Yes, there are instances where you feel you have to behave a certain way because you are a woman, but you have to know where you are going and the kinds of people you will meet, and how to carry yourself in those situations. You have to maintain your own respect so that people will respect you.

MC187/M

WATERBERG DIST

CLINIC





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# CECILE MANHAEVE

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*Cecile is taking me to the Spa Park satellite centre of HAPG. We are on our way to fetch Caroline (a colleague) so that she, in turn, can take me to Thabisile, the person I must interview. When we reach the clinic Caroline climbs in and greets us. Cecile reaches into her bag, and pulling out a soft ball, she hands it over to Caroline saying, "This is for Lucas. I got it at the conference I attended last week. Tell him he must just keep squeezing it to help his arm get better from the stroke."*



I am struck by how simple actions say so much more than words do. I have interviewed Lydia, chatted with Cecile, and witnessed the comings and goings at the very busy centre where HAPG is located, but this simple, thoughtful and sincere action tells me so very much more about this person – and the ethos of this organisation – than anything the interviewees could say to me. I was profoundly moved.

That Cecile has settled in Bela Bela is purely coincidental; that she lives in Africa is a matter of choice. Born in the Congo and brought up in Belgium, Cecile always had a deep yearning to return to the continent on which she was born, to “fill in what I had in my imagination about Africa”. When she did finally get to South Africa, on a visit to her missionary aunt in Pietersburg (now Polokwane) she knew she would have to come back.

A chance encounter with a priest on her return to Belgium made this possible. He told her about the group of volunteers from Belgium working with him on a two-year contract, and about the work they were doing. Joining him as soon as she was given the opportunity, she soon found herself being tailed by the security police<sup>4</sup> because of the leadership courses she was running in the community. This harassment led to the leadership courses coming to a stop in 1989, but community members called Cecile to a meeting one day and asked her to work with them. Cecile found herself becoming a community member from then on. When people became aware of HIV they asked her to learn more and bring that learning back to the community. Ever since, HAPG – and Cecile – have played a significant role in many of the community’s triumphs. HAPG came about organically, as a community response to HIV.

Cecile’s approach is – every step of the way – to consult with community. Every request or question is taken back with, “what do you want to do about this?” These days, HAPG consults with the community through a stakeholders’ forum. “We never developed anything the community did not ask for”, she says.

Cecile has refused to play the role of messiah and, instead, has chosen to walk with, to challenge and most importantly, to listen.

Cecile recalls, about her first few years working in Bela Bela: “When I first went home (to Belgium) after two years, they asked, ‘So what have you been busy with?’ I said, ‘Nothing, just sitting and listening.’ And they asked, ‘don’t you need money?’ and I said ‘No’. It was only when the community came to me after six years and said they were ready to do things, I eventually came back with money.”

One of the difficulties HAPG has experienced is children defaulting on their ARVs because their grandmothers are unable to help them adequately. Cecile shares how they overcame this.



***“We have a number of children who are orphaned and staying with grannies and aunts, and when we saw that it was difficult for them, we called them (the guardians), talked to them and asked ‘What is the problem?’ And it usually came down to ‘I am tired’; and we understand this. So we asked what if we show them (the children) how to do it themselves; and they said they wouldn’t be able to. So the first time, I asked them to send the children on their own, and I showed the children what is what and then got them to fill in their own pillboxes. We went through everything, and then said, ‘Now you must show your grannies.’ They were very pleased that they could do it themselves.*”**

***“If they default I say to them, ‘Who is going to get sick if you don’t take it? Is it me?’ and they say, ‘No’. They know it is up to them and they feel a sense of power and ownership now, and when Mathew Willman (the photographer) took pictures of them, they were so proud of themselves!”*”**



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<sup>4</sup> The security police, or Special Branch as they were more commonly known, were a specialist group of police responsible for uncovering anti-apartheid activities and groups in South Africa.

Cecile recounts a story about Lydia, before she joined HAPG.



***“In 1998, Lydia was brought to the Warmbaths Hospital (where Cecile was offering pre and post test counselling) and diagnosed with tuberculosis (TB) and HIV. She was too sick to continue working. At the time there were no ARVs so it was very scary. I went to visit her, after I had done HIV counselling with her, and tried to talk to her. She refused. I was very worried about her because she was very angry.***

***Each day I came to talk to her but she refused and kept her head under the blankets. On the third day, I put my head under the blankets and said, ‘Okay, I will talk to you like this then, if you don’t talk to me.’ Lydia started laughing. After this, she asked – herself – to see me again, and from then on, it was okay.”***



At this time, support groups were not a common phenomenon. Cecile speaks about the first support group they had.



***“I remember when they first came and I asked them to choose a (nursing) sister to translate. ‘Don’t say anything, don’t probe,’ I told the sister. When it started, all of them were sitting with their heads down, not looking at each other, and I started talking to them. They were peeping shyly at me only, and I said, ‘This is going to be difficult if you don’t look at each other.’ And I said to them, ‘You all know why you are here as you agreed to come, so what are you hiding for?’ And then Lydia finally peeped out at me and Caroline then peeped out from under her hat and I said ‘I can’t see you.’ And slowly they started to show their faces, and then the ice was broken. I will never forget some of those things.”***



These stories bear testimony to Cecile’s views about leadership. The quality she values highest is the ability to listen. She also believes that one should be aware of one’s strengths and weaknesses and be willing to rope in others to assist where there are limitations.

Cecile says she never wants to go ahead of other people. “I want to go with them. So I listen and then throw things back: ‘What do YOU want to do?’”

“A leader is not someone who does everything for you; if I see you can do it and have potential I will help you learn. Humility is so important – I never feel better or worse than anyone. If someone doesn’t ask me I don’t say anything. If you are working in a culture, learn about it. I asked people to tell me, teach me, help me keep track with the culture; and I learnt so many things. I am interested to learn. My intention, coming to a different culture, was to learn about that culture, and help people to move forward; and if they don’t want to, to sit with them. I don’t mind being a reference, but I will push people to do things, because if people just do what you want, what is good about that?”

### **On being a woman in this work**

“Working in this culture was difficult in the beginning because men said, ‘What can a woman do?’ Fortunately, this wasn’t even a question for me. They said, ‘She is driving just like a man’ and I heard comments that I was just like a man. I laughed and asked, ‘What do you mean? A woman can do the same things.’ And they told me at the beginning, ‘Don’t wear trousers’, and I said, ‘This is a real sacrifice.’ After some time I started to wear trousers and one year, close to Christmas, I was asked, ‘Do you know what the young girls are wanting for Christmas?... Trousers!’ And soon they were saying that girls must go to school so they can do things like Cecile. It was not my intention to make this happen – it just did.”

CECILE }  
MANHAEVE }





③

LYDIA  
**POLE**

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***“Lydia is special. She has been with us since 1999, as a member of the support group. After training as a counsellor, she began helping at the hospital, and when we grew, she came to help me with daily administration as well as leading the team in Bela Bela.”***

**CECILE MANHAEVE**

Lydia joined HAPG in 1999 after she was diagnosed with HIV. “I was one of the members of the support group – in the end there were only four of us. We are friends up until today, and when we see each other, we understand each other.” Lydia is the General Coordinator at Bela Bela, supporting Cecile in managing staff and programs.

It was Lydia who, along with other members of the support group, began the first community gardens. These gardens continue to provide vegetables for many people today.

Lydia says she loves her work because she finds that young or old come to her with their problems. She loves to be able to help them.

For her, HAPG is special because people know they have a place to come to where they will get help and support, and information to make decisions.

She says: “We were five people. People were pointing at us but we didn’t care. Then we decided to stand up and tell our stories and this helped other people to go for tests. We have helped a lot of people to talk about their status. This place has helped me and this is why I want to go out and help others.”

Lydia’s philosophy about leadership is that you have to, “Firstly, show that you can do something before you tell them to do that something.”

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# HILARIA SIMON

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*“Before Hilaria came there was a very severe stigma at Vingerkraal, and people didn’t want to talk about HIV – despite daily deaths and an infection rate close to 75% in the early 1990s. She came with the first group to our clinic and then, when we started working with the community, she got them together and motivated and helped with addressing stigma. People in Vingerkraal don’t even worry about stigma nowadays.”*

CECILE MANHAEVE





# Masakhane

ember 2009

Door Door

RDP Hiv/Aids + TB

RDP Hiv/Aids + TB

ember 2009

DOOR DOOR

RDP Hiv/Aids + VCT

RDP Hiv/Aids + VCT

RDP Hiv/Aids + CONDOMS

andary 2010

Door Door

RDP Hiv/Aids + VCT (Active)

RDP Hiv/Aids + TB (Active)

RDP Hiv/Aids + CONDOMS

February

Door Door

CONDOMS + VCT

+ STI

Hilaria is the Team Leader for Vingerkraal and Masakhane. She came to Bela Bela with her husband to look for a job. At the time they were working as reservists for the South African Police Services in Rooiberg, a town roughly 70km outside Bela Bela.

She says: "In 2004, when my sister passed away, she left four children. Two were very sick and, before she died, she was also sick with TB. When she died, I took the children to be tested at the HAPG clinic and they were found to be HIV positive. From here, I opened my eyes to help my community."

Through HAPG, Hilaria began awareness campaigns. A typical day for Hilaria involves going out to visit people living with TB and checking on people who are on ARVs. "We help them by cooking for them; washing and bathing them if they are not feeling good; and encouraging them to take treatment well and on time. I enjoy it because I can see that people are living healthily now."

## On leadership

"It is not so easy to be a leader because there is a lot you have to do so that people working with you can also work together. But I'm trying."

While Hilaria plays down her role, the words that follow, taken from the six monthly report to Oxfam give a sense of the role she has played in her community:

"Towards the end of the year the situation has normalised again but the staff member who moved to Masakhane had the hard job to set-up HBC (home based care) in Masakhane. This proved to be difficult in the beginning because of the insecurity of the staff to speak the local language, but with some extra support from BB (HAPG) staff they have regained their confidence. We are in the process of erecting a small structure in the community as a base to work from. The staff (member) needs to be applauded because they really went all out to take up the care for the community members in their new environment and (we) can feel the response already."

Hilaria shares a story which illustrates the work they do:

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***"There was a family in Vingerkraal – a man and wife – who were very sick and didn't know what their problem was. One day they invited me to come to their place. The man was so sick he couldn't even walk to the toilet. He explained how he started getting sick and I explained that there are lots of sicknesses nowadays and that some of them cannot be detected until a blood test is done. Both decided to get tested and were positive for TB and HIV. The husband was very weak so was immediately put on ARVs. We conducted follow-up visits to check on them and helped the husband by cleaning the house, cooking and bathing him. After two months, you could see he came right. He could walk and cook. After this, he was able to go back to work."***

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Hilaria says that patience is a key quality of a good leader because "People are not the same; people have different cultures and yours might be different, so you have to be patient to understand and to not say 'if you are working like this (in this way) I am not going to help.'"

## On being a woman in this work

"To be a woman or to be a man, if you have the power, it is the same; people don't treat me differently because I'm a woman. To be a good leader, you need to be strong and patient, to communicate with others and learn from other leaders as well. I do see it in myself because I was alone here at Masakhane – my colleagues lived at Vingerkraal – but I didn't think I couldn't do it. I woke every morning and went door to door talking about these diseases. And the people spoke a different language so I had to learn. I just asked my children to teach me."



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# THABISILE KHUMALO

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*Thabisile is one of the people who have benefited from the support of HAPG. She says she has had a difficult life, beginning with her father leaving her mother to take care of her and her siblings on her own. This cycle was repeated when she married her own husband.*

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When I found my husband, I married him and stayed with him happily for 10 years. He changed when my mum passed away and began cheating on me and doing bad things. Then I got very sick. I didn't know I was HIV positive and wondered what was going on with me. When I had a stroke last year, I knew it was something serious.

I sent my child to call Caroline and when she came, I explained that I had been coughing for more than three weeks. Caroline didn't say, 'Test for HIV.' She said, 'You might have TB.' I wanted to test for HIV too, though.

When I found Cecile and Caroline, they made me very brave. When Cecile spoke to me I felt I had someone who is supportive. I am happy now, not angry anymore. I am strong since Cecile helped me. Lots of people are afraid to help me but I am not afraid of my status.

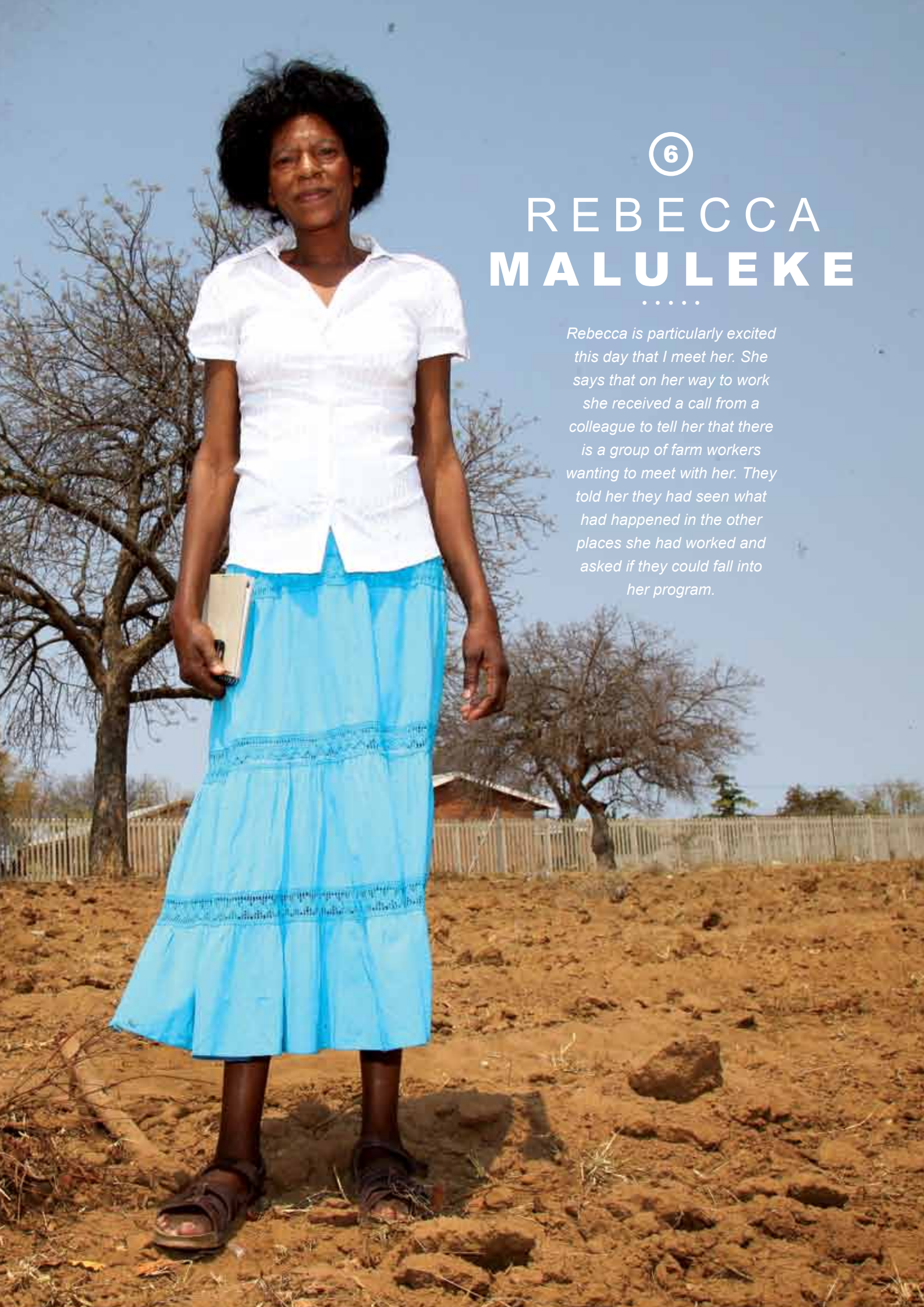
My husband left me with the kids. My second child was doing matric (grade 12) and I didn't think she would pass because I was so sick. And the two little ones – they are now six and four. I tried to contact him (husband) to let him know my status but he didn't respond. I realised that there are lots of women like me who are abused by their men.

Those women (who are being abused) who are staying with their husbands, they must think about it and get out. And those who didn't test for HIV must go and test; but you must be strong first.

I'm still not sure if they (my children) are negative. I am still afraid for them because I didn't know this guy (husband), he was dangerous for me. But now I know I must use a condom if I find someone, and must go and test first before sexual intercourse because most men don't want condoms and don't want to do the test.

I will be happy if one day I can be a counsellor and they can let me talk to the people and change people's lives. I will be happy to change a lot of people. Lots are taking the pills (ARVs) but still doing bad things which make them go down. You have to change yourself first.

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# REBECCA MALULEKE

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*Rebecca is particularly excited this day that I meet her. She says that on her way to work she received a call from a colleague to tell her that there is a group of farm workers wanting to meet with her. They told her they had seen what had happened in the other places she had worked and asked if they could fall into her program.*





**{ REBECCA  
MALULEKE**

***“Yesterday I was going to retire and today I have changed my mind,” says Rebecca. “My target was to reach 1,000 people a year, and then I pick up 1,000 people in one day! This is something that can keep your spirit going. It gives you such satisfaction and tells you what you are doing is making a difference.”***

Antoinette, the Director of CHoiCe, speaks about Rebecca with a lot of love and respect. “Rebecca is 60 and wants to retire because she is sickly and would much rather play with her grandchildren. She’s amazing. She started as Personal Assistant (PA) to Fiona (Director of CHoiCe at the time) and became bored because there was not enough for her to do. I was the training coordinator at the time and she volunteered to help me. She just took over and is stunning!”

Born in South Africa, but married to a Malawian, Rebecca was training to be a nurse when she had to leave the country to go to Malawi with her husband, and couldn’t continue her training there because she was expecting her first child. During her time in Malawi she joined UNESCO, which was a “very interesting and learning time for me. Here I was introduced to computers and worked with people from all over the world.”

After this, Rebecca worked as an estates manager for nine years. This too, involved interacting with many people from different countries. Rebecca says this built her self confidence.

When she came back to South Africa in 1994, after her husband died, she tried to go into a similar line of work, working in an estate agency<sup>5</sup>. Her response to this sector tells a lot about the values and principles which influence the person she is. “I wanted to go into estate agency but I didn’t like the way they worked – unethically. If there is a roof leak, I must fix it first and then sell; and I must be able to have tea with the person later on. So I quit after one year, because ethically, I couldn’t cope.”

.....  
<sup>5</sup> Property sales agency



When Rebecca joined CHoiCe in 2005, it was as PA to Fiona.

“I saw an advertisement for a PA for Fiona Macdonald and I thought I was qualified. She took me on the spot. I learnt about what CHoiCe did, and working with nurses and Fiona was something very great. It was the year she was chosen as Shoprite Woman of the Year<sup>6</sup>, and I was so proud.

It was not so easy at the beginning because it was all new to me, but under Fiona’s guidance, I learnt how NGOs work. After eight months I realised there was a department called ‘Training and Development’ and they were having problems; and when Fiona wasn’t around I would go in and help. After a year, I said to Fiona, ‘Can I say goodbye because they need me more in training and development?’ Fiona was an independent person and she wanted to run things her way; and as a PA, I wanted to run things my way. So we were like two bulls, and this was a relief to us both.”

After two years, Rebecca was asked to head the Training and Development team.

Rebecca shared these stories:

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### **An awakening: working with men**

***“All the time we were always dealing with women, with maybe just a couple of old men who didn’t come back; and suddenly we started opening our ears and listening more and started thinking about what the problem was with men, and realised we needed to get men involved. It’s no use focusing on telling women to use condoms if men are not told. We were telling women to tell men; and how did we expect this to happen?***

***“So we started listening to the men and we saw that men were interested but had been sidelined for so long. We started engaging them in dialogue.***

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<sup>6</sup> Shoprite Checkers – a supermarket chain – introduced this award in 1996 to honour South African women who are seen to be “the most exceptional and achieving women in the country who had not only achieved success in their own respective fields but who had made a tangible difference in communities and society as a whole”. (Source: [www.womenoftheyear.co.za](http://www.womenoftheyear.co.za))

***“Through APAC support three years ago, we had run this program around men as responsible carers. We had found 10 men who were vocal and wanted to help. We brought these men in and trained them as trainers and it was a great success. We saw they could do it and we said go out there and be apostles, because men will listen to men.”***

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## **Helping youth find their voice**

***“In 2008 we received funding from Oxfam HIV and AIDS Program (OHAP) to train groups of participants on HIV, AIDS, STIs and TB. The training was carried out in the Motupa, Madumane, Morudji and Mohlakong areas. After the training we followed up with focus group discussions.***

***“I was most impressed by the group from Mohlakong area. There were four youth in one of the groups: three young men and a girl. One of their main concerns was that they wanted to raise awareness around HIV and TB but didn’t feel they could because, as youngsters, to talk about HIV would be like blasphemy.***

***“They spoke with a great deal of passion and I knew I had to do something to help them. They had all completed grade 12 and were doing nothing in the village. In 2009 I went back to these youth and put a proposal to them: I would make sure they had a platform to talk to people, and they should prepare a drama on HIV that would send the message that they wanted to share. They set about practising and then called me to see their drama. Once I was satisfied that they were ready, I asked them to call some of their local village people to see their drama. They were shy and did not call anyone. I had to go out and collect people, including the village headman, to come and witness the youngsters.***

***“As they were only four, some had to change clothes to represent different people in the various scenes. The people were very impressed, and the village headman praised the youngsters and encouraged them to continue.***

***I suggested they recruit others, which they did, and the Mohlakong Drama Group was born. I have used them to convey messages at workshops and they are so confident now, that after acting, they engage the audience in dialogues relating to the messages they portray. One of the girls also does poetry on HIV after every drama.***

***“This group was given the chance of being trained by professionals from Johannesburg, which APAC supported. Today, they are called on by many, including government departments, to perform at rallies.***

***“I feel I made a difference to eight youth in the village who would have otherwise been hanging around from morning till evening doing nothing. I look forward to seeing these young men and women one day appearing on television. Sometimes when they act you will see people in the audience cry. I too feel like crying because I managed to give a platform to very talented women and men to do something for themselves and for their community.”***

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## **On leadership**

For Rebecca, a leader is someone who can listen to others, who can take advice and who, when criticised, tries to reflect on and rectify their faults with good grace.

***“I would say I see myself not as leader but as a person who works with people on the same level with me; because if I lead them I don’t know what they will be doing behind me. I give advice but I believe we can all be leaders”.***

## **On being a woman in this work**

***“I don’t think it’s been harder to do the work I do because I am a woman. In fact, it may be that it has worked in my favour because I see things as a woman; because we are analytical and loving and we stop and think. We are also patient. I don’t think I would have done it as a man.”***



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SUSANNAH  
COLE  
HAMILTON

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*Originally from Canada, Susannah came to Tzaneen working with the getAhead Foundation (a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to proving that anyone can make a difference and contribute to changing the world).*

It was here she met and married her husband, a farmer from the area.

As Chair of the Board, Susannah brings her networking skills and her ability to “put things together” to the organisation.

Antoinette Schutte, the Director of CHoiCe, says of her, “Susannah helped us out a while ago around mentoring. She came in for three months to help and it became two years. She knows the organisation in and out and was one of the first board members to be selected. She has grown a lot as board member and because of her keen interest, she is now the Chairperson. She challenges the organisation and supports us.”

### **On leadership**

Susannah has had to grow into her role as Chair and believes being a good leader requires that one listen. “It is important to be able to see from the others’ perspective, to move into their environment. It is very easy to think you can have the solution when you don’t, because you are outside”.

“A good leader recognises that she is there to assist and to guide. It can be easy to get off the path because you want to help.

“I bring enthusiasm with me. It’s been a hard learning process because I had never been on a board, let alone a chairperson. So you make mistakes and grow. My passion for development work has meant that I am happy to give that one-on-one support. Everyone on the board believes in CHoiCe.”

### **On being a woman in this work**

When she came to South Africa, Susannah had a different idea from many of the people in the area, about what it means to be a woman. “Perhaps this was an advantage because I always believed I could do anything and challenged restrictions.”

{ SUSANNAH  
COLE  
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*"I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live."*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

What makes a good leader? This is the central and underlying question in this process.

Timmel and Hope (*Training for Transformation: a Handbook for Community Workers, Book 2, 1999*) share the following observation about leadership: "Some people regard leadership as a mysterious, 'charismatic' quality, which some people have and some people do not have. It can also be seen as a skill that many people can develop if they are willing to take the time.

"It takes sensitivity, humility, and love to develop one's skills as a leader, and it takes a number of years of practice."

The women interviewed seem to concur with this point of view. Furthermore, they exemplify these qualities expressed. They are all dedicated women going about their daily commitments to supporting their communities.

Each of the women interviewed had a very different personality and style of working. Yet there were a number of similarities – common threads that ran throughout.

### Willingness to listen

Every one of the leaders interviewed spoke about the need to listen. It was the quality mentioned first by all of them.

The words that spring to mind when I think of Cecile are thoughtful, methodical, humble and sincere. I am struck by her simple, direct approach to life and people. She cares deeply about people and works tirelessly to bring about changes in the lives of her community. However, she refuses to do it alone. Cecile is not interested in accolades or credit for herself. She simply goes about doing what must be done – and people come with her. Cecile recounts attending meetings in the early days of her involvement. "A leader doesn't run ahead of people. You move at their pace. The community kept saying, 'When are you going to do something?' I said, 'I will come to the meetings (and listen). If you stand, I will stand; and if you sit, I will sit too; if you move, I will move too'."

### Bravery

These women are brave. They are willing to try new things and stick their necks out where others haven't been.



Lydia is shy and perhaps a little unsure of herself but she has a gentle spirit and has endured a lot of hardship in getting to where she is. She offers people a kind heart, a listening ear and the wisdom and experience of having been there. She was brave enough, along with Caroline and other support group members, to speak out about their HIV status at a time when people did not want to hear about HIV.

### **A willingness to not know, and therefore, to learn**

In much the same way as Cecile, Rebecca's approach to working with people is, "I don't lead. I work with people on the same level with me, because if I go ahead, I don't know what they will be doing behind me." The best way to describe Rebecca is that she is a powerhouse. You get the sense, even when sitting and chatting, that she has some important business to attend to. She is full of energy and is raring to go. She is also not afraid to try new things.

### **Humility**

Each of the women I met strikes me as being humble and willing to learn from others.

Susannah accepts that she is there to assist and guide, but not interfere. She acknowledges that it is easy to think you have solutions for people's lives but it is more important to allow people to find their own solutions.

### **Inner strength and patience**

For Hilaria, being a good leader means, "...you need to be strong and patient, to communicate with others and learn from other leaders as well". She has needed strength and patience in abundance for the work she has done in the two communities – Vingerkraal and Masakhane. Hilaria is brave and strong. She simply goes about doing what needs to be done. And she does this without any drama.

What Hope and Timmel say is not far off from what any of these women believe, and more importantly, live. We have been led to believe that there is a type of person that is a "born leader". Usually, these are men.

In the interview with Pumla, she asks, "Is someone born a leader, I wonder? I think people make you a leader and they grow you to become a good leader; and then it's up to you to embrace and enhance your skills around being a good leader."

She and the other remarkable women profiled in this process are a testimony to that.

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*“Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”*

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

**Remarkable individuals do not operate in a vacuum. Particularly in the development sector, individuals are shaped by the communities they serve and, importantly, by the organisations that provide the conditions for people to thrive – or not.**

### CHoiCe

It would not be a fair reflection on the organisation to speak about its strengths without honouring its founder member. Fiona Macdonald has left the legacy of a strong organisation that has been able to survive without her. This is often said of a good leader – particularly a founder member: their success is made obvious by the ability of people to manage when they have moved on.

“Fiona was the director and had her own leadership skills – to a point where she was able to leave and they continue without her,” says Pumla.

Antoinette has a very different style of leading from Fiona. Her way is quieter but is effective nevertheless. It is her humility and openness that allows for the emergence of other leaders – like Rebecca.

The attitude of the board makes a difference. Susannah says, “The CHoiCe board is very aware of guiding the organisation to stay in vision and mission; but the passion, the direction is from the organisation – the Director and the people working in the organisation.”

### HAPG

Cecile attributes HAPG’s success to the fact that “We always did with the community, never for the community. If we want to do things, we have to talk about it. The more you open up, the less you want to do things in secret, and the fewer questions there are.”

She says, “When our patients started in support groups we gave them flow charts which they gave the doctor to fill in. We explained how they work and this gives them a sense of power. They know what is going on with them.”

She believes that having staff in the program living with HIV makes a difference because “they know what it’s like and want to do the same for others. They know immediately what to do.”

Fundamentally, though, none of these women claims to be a hero. They simply go about doing their work in heroic ways, changing lives slowly but certainly, making their mark in the ways they know best, and contributing in small or big, but always significant, ways.



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**Title:** They made me brave  
Reflections on women in  
leadership at CHoiCe Trust (CHoiCe) and the  
HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG)

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