

# Flying the flag



Siyakhana project manager Dr Simeon Odugwu gives a pulse check on Siyakhana's sustainability.

Siyakhana is working hard on keeping HIV and AIDS on the radar and building sustainability into everything we do.

Given that about 900 people die each day in South Africa from AIDS and some 1000 new infections take place daily, it is imperative that 'we keep our foot on the gas' when it comes to efforts to curtail this preventable disease.

However, to keep our foot on the gas we require innovative ways to remain sustainable. The 50 companies we service do contribute but many of the costs are funded. So too are the costs of deploying dedicated HIV and AIDS

staff in 12 public sector clinics.

As envisaged our funding from DEG has come to an end and we currently receive funding from Mercedes Benz of South Africa and PEPFAR through BroadReach Healthcare.

Our ongoing efforts will be directed at keeping this innovative and successful public private partnership alive through fundraising.

One of the ways we will do this is by encouraging our trustees to renew high level efforts with the Eastern Cape provincial government to fund some of the posts of the staff at the clinics. We have seen a marked increase in testing rates there and of people going onto to treatment. When one reads Nosakhiwo Sofute's story on page 2 the imperative of treatment becomes clear.

We invite our partners to keep flying the flag for a decrease in infection and the AIDS death toll and to work with us to keep Siyakhana's foot on the gas.

## Life, Above All

South African film director, Oliver Schmitz' film *Life, Above All* received a ten minute standing ovation at the Cannes Film Festival in May.

This is a humbling accolade for Schmitz, the cast and the subject matter which deals primarily with a relationship between mother and daughter, put under immense strain as a result of the stigma and denial around HIV and AIDS.

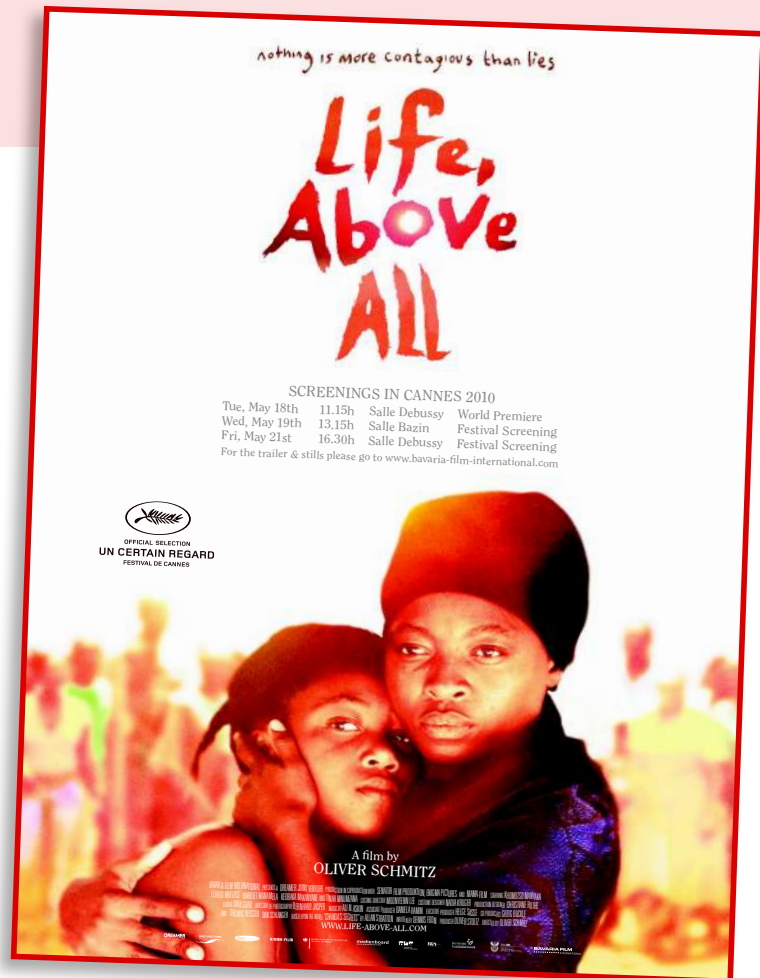
Cannes audiences who are mostly made up of people related to the film industry are known to be difficult to impress.

Based on Canadian author Alan Stratton's book *Chanda's Secret*, *Life, Above All* tells the story of Chanda's courage to track down her mother to ask difficult

questions around why her baby sister died and why the villagers claim she is bewitched, which resulted in her ill mother fleeing their village.

The role of Chanda is played by newcomer Kho-motso Manyaka whom Cannes audiences praised for her raw talent and ability to carry the emotive themes in *Life, Above All*.

Schmitz considers it necessary to view *Life, Above All* in a universal context rather than to limit it to simply being a South African story about AIDS. "It isn't an AIDS movie. It's a very moving drama about a mother-daughter relationship tested by taboo, illness and lies. I didn't want to make a movie that is relegated to a small box: Aids in Africa.



I thought hard about the title, and concluded the most important thing for me is life."

*Life, Above All* will launch in South Africa later this year or early 2011.

## Nosakhiwo lives positively

**“Now no matter what people say, I will stand in front of a full stadium and say I am Nosakhiwo Sofute. I am HIV positive.”**



Nosakhiwo Sofute's life has improved vastly since she faced the reality that her ill health could be because she was HIV positive and she went for a test to find out. In 2007, she came to East London from Cape Town to seek support from her uncle and aunt and to confront an uncertain future.

“I was very, very weak, I couldn't walk far and since I have no parents, I asked my uncle and aunt to

help me. When they first said: 'Can you please test? I was very scared because I was sick, sick, sick.'”

When she tested positive her doctor said she should go for patient training with Siyakhana so that she learns about living with AIDS. Since then Siyakhana and BroadReach have been part of her journey back to health. “They care, they phone and find out how the treatment is going, if I miss my clinic day they find out if I have a problem and find out how I am.”

“On the day I was going for training, I could walk to the car whereas before I couldn't walk far at all. I thought of the people who are fit, fat and beautiful and HIV positive and I told myself, I am going to be like them.”

Her hope was tempered with fears: “I was scared of going on ARVs because I had heard they can kill you.” In spite of initial side effects of a rash that made her lose confidence because “she felt like an open book”, open to discrimination, open to stigma, Nosakhiwo has moved through a veil of darkness associated with HIV and AIDS.

“Now no matter what people say, I will stand in front of a full stadium and say I am Nosakhiwo Sofute. I am HIV positive.”

Reaching this point in her life has not been a smooth path. One of the milestones has been realising that statements without heart can be futile. “I might say I am HIV positive but that is just my voice. If my heart doesn't accept it, then it is no use. I took a decision that I must accept that I am HIV positive in my heart and not just with my voice.”

Initially she was deeply troubled about telling her four children that she was HIV positive. Fears of their fears, fears of speaking the unspeakable, speaking of death silenced her until December 2009 when she went to see her children in Cape Town and disclosed her status.

“My children are 20, 18, 14 and 12 and I sat them down and said: 'I am HIV positive and I am alive and I will always be your mother. You have seen me when I was sick and now you see me stronger.’”

Nosakhiwo finds her status makes life go “up and down”. “Sometimes I am stressed and then I lose weight and the rash comes back.”

She believes strongly in the value of support close to home and says this is where it counts most. “I thank my aunt and uncle who have given me lots of support. It is best to have support where you stay.”

Nosakhiwo is working again and is a co-ordinator at the Mabubuye Ubuntu Community Project that supports orphans and vulnerable children. Yes she says, their plight does get to her and she can have sleepless nights worrying about some of the hardship the children face.

But on the bright side she is now healthy enough to live in her own home and with a big smile shares that there is romance in her life with someone who is also HIV positive and condoms are very much part of their relationship. Her children visit in holidays, her viral load test registers the virus is undetectable which makes her “very, very happy.”

Shedding light on the implications of an undetectable viral load, Siyakhana project manager, Dr Simeon Odugwu comments: “This does not mean that there is no virus in your blood; it just means that there is not enough for the test to find and count. Undetectable viral load is a key indicator of treatment success and we are happy that most of our patients have achieved that.”

## Pulse Check



Siyakhana's recent achievements from October 2009 to date are set in context below against the overall achievements since project inception in 2006.

At present Siyakhana has 50 active participant companies on their books including 13 of the initial companies which renewed their service level agreements with Siyakhana.

During the period 1467 employees received Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT), bringing the total VCT numbers to 10 128. Some 1 094 people took HIV tests and over the total project 7 813 people have taken tests.

During the period 151 people tested HIV positive and over the total period 814 have tested positive. There are 416

people who are active in the treatment programme and 145 are on antiretroviral treatment. This raises an area of concern. While one possibility for the difference between those positive and in the treatment programme could be that people have medical aid and are being treated outside the programme, the greater likelihood is that denial and fear of being stigmatised has resulted in their non-participation.

Of significance is how the testing rates at the 12 public sector clinics where Siyakhana deploys dedicated HIV and AIDS staff have steadily risen. In October 2009, 1040 people took HIV tests and in March 2010, 1 870 tested. In September 2008, only 536 took HIV tests at clinics.

The positivity rate is around 19%, clearly then the more people who test and find out their status, the sooner those who are positive can begin treatment when it is indicated.