

identifying themselves as HIV positive. They worry about having their HIV status revealed in their communities, where everyone may know everyone else's business. Organizers stress the importance of the confidentiality agreement, telling women "it is the law to guard confidentiality."

After cooking together, and eating the meal that's prepared, the women have some time to talk amongst themselves—sharing their everyday challenges or learning new skills from invited guest speakers while the children play down the hall, supervised by volunteers from AIDS Vancouver.

"We won't live by hiding ourselves," says Julia, one of the Sahwanya members. "We encourage people to bring family issues—that's the point! But we don't force anyone to talk."

With the children out of earshot, women can speak freely without the worry of their children hearing. Disclosure of HIV status to family members and

Dr. Barrios said that he sees African people with HIV dying in Vancouver, not from lack of access to treatment, but due to sheer isolation.

friends is a popular topic of discussion. Since the community kitchen began in June 2007, and most of the children who have attended are 8 years old or younger, disclosure to children has not been a major issue for the women—yet. But organizers are very aware that it will soon become an issue for many of the women. The possibility of children discussing their mother's HIV status presents a difficult challenge for the women, who want

to make their own decisions about how and when they disclose this.

The Positive Women's Network and the Oak Tree Clinic help promote and support the program. And, along with supervising the children, AIDS Vancouver initially helped organizers with project development.

Sahwanya is one way to ease the isolation that African women living with HIV face. As it says on the poster, "Let's break the chain of isolation and pull together for our common good." The community kitchens are held on Saturdays once a month at the Bridge Clinic in Vancouver. ✂

Jeanne Nzeyimana is the founder of Sahwanya whose goal is to make a positive impact on the Positive African women's lives in Vancouver.

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The GOAL Project: University-community action on HIV/AIDS

BY LAURA M. BISAILLON

WHAT HAS BEEN MARINATING IN THE KITCHENS ON THE WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH UNIT (WHRU) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA'S INSTITUTE FOR POPULATION HEALTH IS FAR FROM JUST ANOTHER HIV AND AIDS PROJECT. CREATED IN 2004 IN RESPONSE TO THE INCREASING RATES OF NEW HIV INFECTION WITHIN AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN COMMUNITIES IN OTTAWA, THE *Global Ottawa AIDS Link (GOAL) Project* HAS GROWN SIGNIFICANTLY FROM ITS EARLY DAYS AS THE VITAL BUT RESOURCE-STARVED ORGANIZATION KNOWN AS THE "UNPROJECT."

Immigrants and refugees from countries where HIV is endemic made up 19% of new male HIV cases and 70% of new female cases in Ottawa between 2001 and 2003. Motivated by this growing health concern, Ottawa community members and the WHRU got together to brainstorm how to address barriers to health and social care, systemic racism, stigmatization and discrimination faced by people with HIV/AIDS within the African and Caribbean communities in Ottawa. ►

After Toronto, Ottawa counts the largest African and Caribbean communities in Ontario and, according to the Ontario HIV Epidemiological Monitoring Unit, these communities made up over 16% of all new HIV diagnoses in Ontario in 2007. Yet supports for people from these communities affected by HIV and AIDS are still in the early stages of development. In the words of one woman working with GOAL, “We need forums through which we can meet to discuss overcoming cultural barriers and generational gaps. We need to communicate with service providers so that health service delivered in sensitive ways will really make a difference in the long run.”

“South-North and North-South knowledge sharing about human health and community research capacity is a big part of GOAL,” says Carol Amaratunga, Chair of WHRU and co-founder of the GOAL Project. In 2004 and 2006, GOAL delegates participated at Bangkok and Toronto International AIDS Conferences and cultivated partnerships with Thai and Rwandan universities, including a strong relationship with its Twinning Linkage partner, *la Ligue Universitaire de lutte contre le sida* at the National University of Rwanda in Butare, Rwanda.

GOAL focuses on issues related to HIV and AIDS, but its mission is broader. Project organizers have studied and learned from the multitude of community-based research (CBR) projects—the success stories and the not-so-successful stories from St. John’s to Victoria.

In mid-2006, GOAL led six focus groups in Ottawa with members of the African and Caribbean communities and the service providers who work

with them. One of the ideas that emerged was to host a workshop on the role of art as an HIV/AIDS prevention and health promotion tool.

Approximately 60 people, including researchers, AIDS service providers, students, youth and theatre specialists attended the two-day workshop “Art-based HIV/AIDS prevention: Best practices.” With a line-up of international, local and national guest speakers as well as performances by poets and actors, the

“South-North and North-South knowledge sharing about human health and community research capacity is a big part of GOAL.”

event showcased a range of art forms such radio and TV soap operas, “forum theatre” from Rwanda, photography and even health-promoting hairdressers from Ottawa’s Operation Hairspray, as effective ways to communicate sensitive sexual health messages.

At the helm of the GOAL Project are women leaders from Ottawa’s African and Caribbean communities, such as Félicité Murangira, GOAL’s project coordinator and co-founder and current co-chair of the African and Caribbean Health Network of Ottawa. In 2006, Murangira was presented with the YMCA-YWCA Women of Distinction Award and the Planet Africa Volunteer of the Year Award. Community leaders involved in the GOAL Project set the pace and provide vision for the project

which has received funding since 2005 from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), the Canadian Development Agency (CIDA) and Health Canada. The women work with in the WHRU team and are supported in research endeavors by nearly a dozen scientists from the Institute of Population Health. GOAL Project’s founding team includes: Jack McCarthy of Ottawa’s Somerset West Community Health Centre, Department of Public Health of Ottawa; Melissa Rowe of the African Caribbean Health Network of Ottawa (ACHNO); Heather Smith Fowler; Dr. Lucie Kalinda, Félicité Murangira; and Carol Amaratunga.

The GOAL Project aims to provide a platform for the theory and practice of healthy community development. Drawing from domestic and international expertise and knowledge, it builds on past successes in community-based research and applies those best practices in the context of HIV/AIDS health services. Organizers hope that GOAL will serve as a model for community health services related to HIV/AIDS that will be adopted or franchised by other communities prepared to invest the effort over the long term. ✎

For more information, visit:

University of Ottawa, Women’s Health Research Unit
www.whru.uottawa.ca/en-home.php

African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario
www.accho.ca/index.aspx?page=hiv_facts

Operation Hairspray, Ottawa Public Health
www.ottawa.ca/residents/health/living/sexual/hairspray_en.html