

GRACE OVERCOMES

By Wendi Hammond

Jabu Dlamini is my friend. We are friends because we have things in common. We both like comfortable shoes, we laugh at each other's jokes, we pray for each other's families, we both like to dance. Most of all, we both love Swaziland. But we have very different lives, and whenever I think about my friend, I wish I could learn to live my life more like Jabu lives hers. This is her story.

Jabu is a simple, humble woman, fiercely dedicated to her family and to her beloved country of Swaziland. She lives in a small, rural community called Dwalini. Here most people, including Jabu, live on homesteads with neither running water nor electricity. She grows most of her family's food and sells handmade jewelry and vegetables in hopes of earning enough money for school fees.

Everything is a struggle in Swaziland, a country plagued by many problems: desperate poverty, lack of access to safe water and medical care, and the highest HIV/AIDS rate in the world. People who live in conditions like this feel unempowered; they have come to view themselves as recipients of care rather than caregivers. But for some reason, despite a life filled with unbelievable challenges, Jabu decided she could do something about the problems in Swaziland.

Jabu became part of Shiselweni Home-Based Care (SHBC), a ministry that trains volunteer caregivers to call on their friends and neighbors who are sick, many of whom are HIV-positive. Through SHBC Jabu learned about all the issues related to HIV/AIDS and the importance of antiretroviral (ARV) treatment. Jabu has been serving with them for five years now, because she was part of the very first group of 36 SHBC caregivers who started in 2006. The ministry

has now grown to more than 850 volunteer caregivers who collectively serve more than 2,700 of their neighbors.



GRACE OVERCOMES PAIN

A little over one year ago, Jabu personally experienced the same tragic circumstances so many of the people she serves have faced. Because of her work with SHBC, Jabu recognized the early signs of the HIV virus in her husband and came to the unhappy realization that continuing to have unprotected sex with him would jeopardize her life. She told him he must wear a condom if she was to have sex with him. For a quiet Swazi woman living in a patriarchal culture where women are largely voiceless, making this kind of demand was very brave. She could have been beaten or banished from her home for saying such a thing to her husband. Thankfully he simply refused to wear a condom and left her homestead (he had six other wives and 55 children!!!). When he became very sick, she finally persuaded him to be tested, and as she suspected, he was HIV-positive. She begged him to get on

ARV treatment, reminding him of all his children who needed his support. For complicated cultural reasons that are difficult for Americans to understand, he refused to get treatment and died within a few months of his diagnosis. As I write this, Jabu is not HIV-positive... but she will continue to worry about her status for several years to come.

A few months after her husband's death, his siblings came to Jabu's homestead with a devastating pronouncement. You see, in Swaziland if a man does not have a will – and most do not – his brothers are entitled to all his possessions, and they often banish his widow(s) from their homestead(s). In Jabu's case, they allowed her to stay in her homestead but took nearly everything Jabu had that might have helped her provide for her family: a tractor and plow, a car, cows, chickens, goats – claiming ownership of them. This added to her despair and fear about how she was going to care for her children.

In a true reflection of Christian community, Jabu's fellow SHBC caregivers came around her to provide comfort. They reminded her that God would provide, and He has already done so many times through these dear friends. They gave to her from their own limited food supply, helping Jabu when she had none.

Jabu's husband contracted AIDS because in Swaziland it is common for people to have multiple, concurrent sex partners. This is just part of their culture. Perhaps he had sex with prostitutes. Perhaps some of the wives slept with other men and brought HIV to him. If I were in Jabu's circumstances, knowing that I had been faithful and monogamous, I think these possibilities would haunt me. But not Jabu. She doesn't waste energy wondering about this. Instead, she just serves and sacrifices and gives grace... and doing so is bringing her healing. Among the seven wives, only Jabu refused sex with their husband. Now two are HIV-positive and Jabu is caring for and

counseling them, demonstrating the kind of grace that is hard for us to comprehend. She is fiercely determined to educate her children that they must make different choices, and she prays tirelessly for them. Besides her own children, she is raising one granddaughter and niece whose parents died of AIDS.

GRACE OVERCOMES PRIDE

Near the end of our time in Swaziland last summer Jabu gave me a snapshot of grace that will forever be imprinted on my heart. When teams from America visit, the SHBC caregivers have better meals than

they typically do because we provide funds so they can cook for us and eat with us. Often we have chicken and an extra side dish that Swazi people eat only on very special occasions. It is difficult for us to understand how often food occupies the thoughts of Swazi people. Without sustainable incomes, they worry every day about how they will eat and feed



their children. This worry was intensified for Jabu when she lost her husband and his brothers seized so many of her resources. So on this day I was happy as I watched my friend generously fill her plate with a delicious and nutritious meal. I was pleased that the presence of our mission team enabled her to have a good meal. But moments after filling her plate I watched in astonishment as Jabu, rather than eat the food to which she was entitled, walked over to two women also dressed in mourning garments and gave her plate of food to them! These were two other wives of her deceased husband, the two who are HIV-positive and for whom she is now providing care.

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GRACE LIKE BREATHING

When I later affirmed Jabu for her beautiful, grace-filled spirit, she was completely baffled. “What do you mean?” she asked. That day I had to face the greatest difference between me and Jabu. You see, when I give, I often feel a twinge of pain at what I’m giving up. Sometimes I feel a twinge (or more) of pride at having sacrificed. I might feel resentment, thinking that those I’m serving don’t appreciate me enough for what I’ve given. The point is: I always think about what I’m doing. But this isn’t the case with Jabu. She doesn’t think about what she’s doing any more than she thinks about walking across the street or taking a breath in and letting a breath out. The giving of grace has become such a part of her that in my attempt to affirm her I may as well have said, “Jabu, you are a very good breather and walker.”

Whenever I pray for Jabu, I know for certain that James 2:5 is true – “Has not God chosen those who are poor in this world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised to those who love Him?” Jesus, help me to learn from Jabu what it means to live “rich in faith,” so that like her I might someday learn to offer grace as You and Jabu have taught me... as naturally as walking and breathing.

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in Fresno, CA. Project Glory partners in Swaziland with Shiselweni Home-Based Care, a registered Swazi NGO and part of the Swaziland Reformed Church. The mission of Project Glory is to encourage and support SHBC caregivers like Jabu in their work because they are

models of Matthew 5:16... doing good work that glorifies their Father in heaven. You can learn more about the work of Project Glory and SHBC at www.project-glory.org.