

# Portraits of AIDS in Africa

## Tales of Two Villages

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## Sister Francis Jane Boston

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**S**ister Francis Jane Boston lives in the village of Sefhare, Botswana. Since 1995 she has devoted her life to helping the residents of Sefhare cope with the rapidly spreading AIDS virus. A beautiful woman and a brisk walker, this seventy-year-old nun is hard to keep up with. As a child growing up in Melbourne, Australia, Sister Francis knew that her calling would be to a religious order and that she might one day become a missionary. Sister Francis was raised in a strict but loving English and Irish Catholic family. For over fifty years she has been associated with the charitable missionary work of the Ursuline Sisters, an order founded in Italy, in 1535, that focuses on the education of girls and the care of the sick and needy. Her life's work has taken her to Asia and to other areas in Africa. Educated as a teacher and seasoned with third-world challenges, Sister Francis has experienced firsthand the devastation wreaked by the AIDS virus.

**S**ister Francis turns deadly serious when speaking of the conditions in her village and throughout Botswana. When she first began working in Sefhare seventeen years ago, the AIDS virus was the leading killer of villagers. Ironically, it was also the silent elephant in the room. It took Sister Francis two years to understand the complex social maze in Sefhare and the way in which it was conspiring with AIDS to destroy lives and families. Sister Francis approached the problems of the village like a difficult-to-solve puzzle. She helped villagers find medical care, educated them about the AIDS virus, and taught them what to do to stop its spread.



Older men in the village with AIDS actually believed that having sex with a very young child would eradicate the virus from their bodies. Sister Francis and the other caregivers she worked with were confronted with the challenge of how to expose the untruth of this appalling belief, and with education and guidance they have largely eliminated this horrific practice. "It was a very uncomfortable situation," says Sister Francis, "but a very needed discussion to have."

Almost everyone in Sefhare knew of a family member or friend either sick or suffering with the virus or dead from AIDS. But no one was talking openly about it. Anxiety prevailed and superstitions and cover-ups were a feature of all conversations on the subject. Sister Francis explains:

We all heard the AIDS virus was like a terrible monster up in Uganda. It was like a raging fire and we all were waiting for it. It is estimated

that the AIDS virus arrived in Botswana around 1980 and was initially spread by the many truck drivers traveling down from the north. Prostitution also played a major role in spreading the virus.

By the early 1990s people were dying every day, but AIDS was only whispered about and never openly discussed. Soon, though, even locally famous and important business owners and government officials were getting sick and dying at an alarming rate. According to Sister Francis,

Everyone knew the real truth. But at that time nobody would admit their family members had died of AIDS. Everybody was dying from another cause. Fifteen years ago the Sisters and I walked this village every day in search of answers and how to provide help. We went to the schools, hospitals, and homes. We soon became involved with two very skilled women caretakers who treated young mothers and their children with AIDS.



*"The next logical step is getting the world to understand that this country needs nutrition, and lots of it."*

Sister Francis says that she personally learned so much from these two women working at their sides in the "trenches" of this dying village. Young mothers with five or more children to care for came down with the virus and died. Some had caught the virus from unrelated children they had taken into their homes.

The next horror to hit Sefhare and elsewhere in Africa was the tsunami of orphaned children whose parents had succumbed to AIDS. In Sefhare, every day an alarming number of children were becoming orphans. This continues to be a serious problem. At one time, in this village of six thousand or so people, fifteen to twenty-five funerals took place daily. Today, thanks to the availability of anti-viral medication, the number of funerals has dropped to about eight per week. But almost every day there is still a death from AIDS, and it continues to kill more people than old age in Sefhare.

The small children whose parents have died are typically split up and placed in other families to be raised. Families are still

taking in the children of a brother or sister who has died from AIDS. "You can't keep absorbing children into families," says Sister Francis. "If you have five of your own and add six more children to the mix-you're already in poverty and have not the means to even feed your own children-you now have a very bad situation."

Before the anti-viral medication became available, Sister Francis recalls that all they could do was hold the hands of the victims and watch them slowly wither away and die. But with medication they can now educate and encourage those infected with the virus to take charge of their lives by seeking better nutrition and staying on their drugs. This has been a positive breakthrough.

The Botswana government and the country's hospital have pulled out all the stops, instituting a countrywide program that gets the anti-viral medication into the hands of the people who need it most. Infected Botswana citizens have the right to receive free anti-viral medication. However, this has placed an enormous

financial strain on the government. Everyone associated with health care in Botswana has received training and education about this disease. Unfortunately, taking the medication is not enough; you must have good food and nutrition to hold the virus at bay. Therein lies the problem, and Sister Francis explains that

good quality, highly nutritious food is extremely hard to come by in this village and many other villages in Botswana. You can totally forget it if you are poor. Since most of the inhabitants are

poor, we have yet another complex situation that is hard to combat. I'm convinced, and so are the doctors here, that high-calorie, vitamin-rich liquid nutrition and government-supplied peanut butter prolongs the lives of people with AIDS. Giving one-thousand cans of liquid nutrition to one-thousand people is not going to be beneficial in the long run. However, giving one-thousand cans to one-hundred people over time-that's how you can measure results and make the greatest impact.





**I**t's a seven-day workweek for Sister Francis. There is always a challenge, always someone in need. She now spends her time consulting villagers on AIDS education and prevention, helping with the adoption of orphans into new families, and encouraging villagers to create small gardens that can become high-yield food sources for their families. Several times a week Sister Francis also attends funerals and offers spiritual support to families who have lost loved ones from the AIDS virus.

**W**ith the continuous support of her religious order and outside organizations like FAWN, UNICEF, CARE, and others, Sister Francis and the many others who have helped her along the way have been successful at focusing the aid that has come to Sefhare.

**T**he next logical step is getting the world to understand that this country needs nutrition and lots of it," says Sister Francis. "Without it we are all sitting on a time bomb that will eventually explode. Without the proper nutrition many more young people are eventually going to die," she says. "It's not a question of if, it's a question of when."