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Part-time lawyer raises the bar on helping others

REALITY CHECK/Frank Carini

It's not an easy place to find on a map, but the poverty-ravaged country of Lesotho is in the forefront of Elizabeth Ziemba's life.

In fact, the Maryland-sized country in southern Africa became an obsession three years ago, when the part-time Newport resident decided she wanted to do something to lessen the pain and suffering of its people, especially its impoverished children.

An estimated 2.3 million African youths are living with HIV/AIDS, and Lesotho particularly has been hit hard by this deadly disease. The tiny country has among the highest HIV-infection rates in the world. Of the country's roughly 2 million people, about a third are HIV-positive. This AIDS tidal wave has left about 185,000 Lesotho children orphaned or abandoned, their lives devastated.

Ziemba has witnessed the misery firsthand. She has seen up to 20 kids living in a single room and children, some as young as 6, living on their own in mud huts. It breaks her heart.

During her first trip to the beautiful, but destitute, country three years ago, the New York City-born Ziemba visited the small home of a 60-something woman who was caring for about 20 children, ages 4 months to 17 years. She arrived carrying two bags of groceries. One of the boys, no older than 6, spotted an apple in one of the bags and began jumping up and down in anticipation.

When his surrogate mother told him he could have half tonight and half tomorrow, the boy's excitement only grew. Ziemba was floored.

"I was so blown away by this ... to see this young child so excited because he was going to have half an apple that night," said Ziemba, who has visited the country each of the past three years. All three visits confirmed the same reality. "There's such a staggering

level of poverty," she said.

The average annual income in Lesotho is \$600 - about a \$1.60 a day. There are few cars, and most people travel on foot or on the backs of ponies. Access to health care is limited, if not nonexistent, for the many people (about 70 percent of the population) who live in the country's rural areas. Hunger is a growing problem, worsened by drought.

What wealth the county does have usually ends up in the pockets of the powerful or the already rich. Last year, a 603-carat diamond - the 15th-largest diamond ever found - was mined from the mountains of Lesotho. Britain-based Gem Diamonds Ltd. sold the stone to London-based Graff for \$12.4 million.

The multimillion-dollar transaction didn't help lower the country's poverty rate.

But Ziemba and her all-volunteer organization have made it their mission to improve the lives of those most in need. Brookline, Mass.-based SHARED Inc., which Ziemba - burned out from decades of practicing immigration law - founded five years ago with the help of two friends, now has a sole focus: helping the suffering people of Lesotho.

The nonprofit agency helps fill gaps in the country's health-care delivery system by providing urgently needed medicines and medical supplies. For example, the agency helps provide the materials needed to conduct the HIV tests supplied by the William J. Clinton Foundation. These supplies only cost 75 cents per person per test, but that's an expensive undertaking in that part of the world.

"The demand and need for testing is so high and they don't have the money to buy these small supplies," said Ziemba, who bought a condominium in Newport six years ago after 20-plus years of routinely visiting the City-by-the-Sea. "That's the gap that we fill. They may seem like minor things, but they're an important part of the process."

SHARED volunteers also helped the SOS Children's Village - an orphanage on the outskirts of the capital city of Maseru that is home to about 30 malnourished children ages 5 to 15 - turn a barren 10-acre plot into a community garden.

While Ziemba found starting the organization far more challenging than law school or passing the bar, fundraising has proven to be an even more difficult proposition. Ziemba compares it to begging.

The organization's most successful fundraiser - besides the agency's eight-person board of directors digging into their own pockets - was held just last month, when SHARED hosted an evening with Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

"We're a small organization hoping to have a big impact," the part-time lawyer said.

It already has.

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