



## A shopsteward tackles the stigma of **HIV/AIDS** in the workplace

**Bonakele Grootboom** is a Samwu shopsteward who is working tirelessly to assist many in his community and workplace who are HIV positive. Grootboom spoke to the **Labour Bulletin** a mere two weeks after a fellow Samwu member he had assisted, died from the disease.

**B**onakele Grootboom, a Samwu shopsteward, has been involved in HIV/AIDS work in his community of Bongulethu, a township just outside Oudtshoorn since 1997. He was instrumental in setting up the Bongulethu AIDS Group (BAG) – an organisation that includes representation and support from 90 community organisations, labour and the church. BAG, as it has become known, is involved in a range of interventions in the township from home-based care to providing DOTS (directly observed TB treatment) and voluntary counselling and testing. Grootboom explains that as the disease continues to spread and more and more people get infected, the township has had to begin to deal with HIV/AIDS orphans.

A key focus of the work done by BAG is to try and dispel the stigma around the disease. Grootboom says, this is something he feels very strongly about. He recounts the story of a Samwu

member who approached him about two years ago and informed him that he was HIV positive. The worker told Grootboom of his status on the basis that he would keep it secret, as he feared possible discrimination and the reaction of the workers.

However, time passed and Grootboom assisted the worker in receiving ongoing counselling so as to begin to accept his HIV status. He also provided support so that he was able to inform the workers in his department of his disease. Both worked for the Oudtshoorn municipality. Despite fears of rejection 'the workers were so sad when they heard the news but they loved Mr X even more after he told them of his status. This is despite the fact that he was scared that they would discriminate against him,' Grootboom says. Although the workers and management responded positively and assisted where they could, Grootboom acknowledges that the stigma is still there. 'In every shopstewards' meeting I

raise the issue and talk about health and safety issues and HIV/AIDS – the shopstewards do not however, ask me about the disease,' he adds.

Grootboom became involved in HIV/AIDS work after he saw how people with HIV/AIDS were being discriminated against. Since beginning to work in his community, he has seen a dramatic rise in the number of infections – especially within the 16 to 36 age group. He says an increasing number of young women are being infected. This could be partly due to the fact that sex work has become quite prevalent in the area due to the high rate of unemployment coupled with the close proximity of the military base in Oudtshoorn, where women are offered R500 for sex without a condom.

Grootboom will continue with his work in the community and put all his energies into ensuring that the work of BAG assists those infected and prevents further infections. 'I have children of my own, I need to be involved.'

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