

15 Mothers, 15 Cameras By Jill Anderson

Each woman's story is different: Caroline didn't want to tell her husband she was HIV positive. Pumla has three children who are HIV negative. Nolukholo hasn't disclosed her HIV positive status to her family.

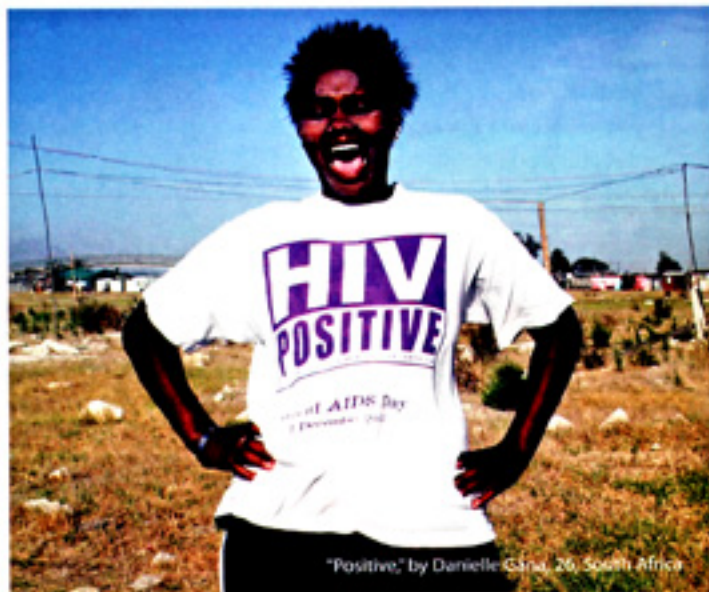
This winter, the HGSE community had the unique opportunity to experience the lives of these South African mothers and mothers-to-be through a series of photos taken by the women, all struggling with poverty and HIV. The photos were part of a month-long exhibit at the Ed School called "The House is Small but the Welcome is Big." Organized by Neal Baer, Ed.M.79, and the Venice Arts Organization, the project teaches underprivileged people how to document their lives and struggles through the arts.

For Baer, an award-winning executive producer and writer of television shows *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, *ER*, and *China Beach*, his latest work on this project is particularly rewarding, he says. He got the idea for the photo project while traveling to India to speak about incorporating AIDS topics into TV shows. He figured that using cameras to document lives, particularly AIDS in Africa, would be a worthwhile project. He contacted the Venice Arts Organization after seeing the work of their creative director, Jim Hubbard, and together they raised money to purchase the cameras and teach the women, 15 in all, how to take photographs.

Baer views much of his work as a chance to educate. Although he isn't directly working in a classroom, he believes the work he does educates in a different way.

"There are a lot of different ways of communicating and that's the basic level of educating," he says. "Through photography, you can use a medium to communicate that's relatively inexpensive."

Part of what makes this project interesting, Baer says, is that the exhibit allows the audience to learn about these women from their point of view.



"Positive," by Danielle Gama, 26, South Africa

"This isn't from our perspective," he says. "You get very different pictures from people who are documenting their own lives in ways that they couldn't before because they didn't have access to cameras. What resulted are pictures and stories about disclosing their HIV status and what that meant to them."

The photography also gave the women a confidence about their lives and their importance. Two of the women attended photography school after the project wrapped. Copies of some of the images were also sold, helping to raise money for the budding photographers.

"One woman was able to buy a new roof and another could pay for a new school for her children," says Baer, who visited them this past August. "They had never seen that much money ever, and we're talking about \$100."

To see a slideshow of the photos, and for upcoming exhibition dates, go to www.venice-arts.org.