

# Health in every Hobeni hut

**E**VEN though sickly 83-year-old Qumbeleni Hlwempu never saw his childhood friend Donald Woods again after he fled into exile in 1978, he is happy the renowned anti-apartheid activist's memory lives on in the rural hills around Hobeni where they used to hunt birds as children.

One of 34 102 local people screened by the Donald Woods Foundation's (DWF) "health in every hut" programme since 2007, Hlwempu is convinced more people would have died from illnesses like HIV/Aids, hypertension, high blood pressure and diabetes if the foundation was not there to help.

"Donald Woods has been gone from here for a long time but he has not been forgotten.

"Since the foundation started there have been big changes in the community and the health of everyone has improved.

"You now have people coming to your door to check if you are okay."

Although the Woods family trading store closed down years ago, the old buildings have been renovated and now form part of the Donald Woods centre where the acclaimed international foundation is based.

"It makes me proud that the boy we named Zwelinyikima – the world is shaking – never forgot his rural roots."

Born in 1933 and raised in Hobeni, near the Haven Hotel, Woods was fluent in Xhosa and his family still hold a special place in local peoples' hearts.

Elderly Mbonomtsha Jo, who has never forgotten how the Woods family gave him 10 cows on credit years ago so he could use them as *lobola* to get married, is convinced he would not be alive today if DWF community health outreach workers (Chows) had not visited him in his rural Cwebe hut to treat his hypertension.

The 88-year-old is now also blind and unable to walk. Jo said regular visits by local Chows carer Khanyisa Volibi had vastly improved his quality of life.

"I was stuck in my hut until the foundation helped me get treatment for my hypertension.

"I now have hope."

Since the foundation outreach team visited Jo's homestead overlooking the Ntlongyana River and, in their huts, tested his family for a range of illnesses, the old man has also been given a wheelchair so he can sit outside in the sun.

"I do not feel lonely any more, my quality of life has improved a lot."

In 2007 the DWF teamed up with the Eastern Cape government to improve rural healthcare.

Since then over 100 local people have been trained and employed as



Former Daily Dispatch editor Donald Woods' childhood home on the Wild Coast is a beacon of hope for thousands of marginalised villagers. **David Macgregor** spent time with the Donald Woods Foundation that was established soon after he died in 2001 to improve rural healthcare

Chows to keep tabs on the people already screened.

More locals are being trained as Chows and the eventual aim is to screen and do ongoing follow-up healthcare visits to 60 000 people around Hobeni.

After three months' training, Ntsikilelo Mfiki, 25, was counting the days until he became a fully-fledged Chows fieldworker, looking after people near his home.

Jobless since he matriculated in 2006 despite getting good grades for maths and physics, Mfiki said he saw a job ad for Chows recruits at a clinic and signed up.

"It is great. I am now earning money and helping people to stay healthy."

Since it started, the DWF has become a beacon of hope for marginalised people living in an area plagued by poor healthcare, slow service delivery and endemic unemployment, according to partnerships manager Denver Webb.

He said besides the "health in every hut" campaign, the foundation also trained and empowered local teenagers to provide peer education and leadership to youth in the area.

For many it is the first job they have ever had.

"Most of our work has been in community development, health, education and sport."

Instead of locating themselves in a city far from where their work is needed, the DWF bought the old Woods trading store and turned this into their head office from where they run rural development programmes.

Facilities have been upgraded to provide accommodation, offices and training rooms as well as a community meeting place.

Health in every hut programme director Katy Pepper said the initiative grew from a very successful HIV/Aids programme they started in the area years ago.

She said besides improving healthcare, the foundation also wanted to build rural people's skills so the community could help themselves.

Her husband Dr Matt McNally said the Chows teams played a supportive roll by going house to house picking up on ailments and referring people to clinics.

"Our core function is to identify people with ailments and connect them to the clinics. A big key is follow-ups."



**NEW HOPE:** The Donald Woods Centre, which includes the old family trading store (inset), accommodation and training facilities, forms a vital part of the foundation set-up in the former Daily Dispatch editor's rural Hobeni home

Pictures: DAVID MACGREGOR



**ON THE SCENE:** Health in every hut workers check up on the health of 83-year-old Qumbeleni Hlwempu at his rural homestead



**PEOPLE HEALTH:** Dr Matt McNally of the Donald Woods Foundation examines a patient at the Hobeni clinic

Woods's son Dillon, who is chief executive of the foundation, said his father's love for Hobeni and the people living there had a huge influence on his life.

"My dad had a vision of doing something in the area, but he had so much else going on and development work was not really his bag.

"We only got going a few years after he died, and focused on that area because no one seemed to be doing anything for that community."

The foundation's drive to do something around Hobeni was a combination of the need there as well as the family connection to the area.

Although old-time Transkei trading stores

were always a hub for local communities, Woods said it was important not to forget their "colonial legacy" of creating a monopoly for white traders. They

were also used to recruit labour for the mines.

In Hobeni, the old trading store and the grounds around them have been transformed into a beacon of hope.

"Next year, our aim is to widen the use of the centre as primarily a project base and training centre to have more of a community focus and community interaction."

Although hard work goes into fundraising, Woods says plans are afoot to make the centre financially self-sustaining. — [davidm@dispatch.co.za](mailto:davidm@dispatch.co.za)

## Proud legacy of fighting apartheid

FORMER anti-apartheid activist Donald Woods was born on December 15 1933 in rural Hobeni, where his family ran a trading store.

After matriculating from Christian Brothers College in Kimberley, Woods enrolled in 1952 for a law degree at the University of Cape Town where he became polit-

ically active in the anti-apartheid Federal Party, according to Wikipedia.

After two years as a legal apprentice, Woods chose journalism instead and worked as a reporter for the Daily Dispatch. In the late 1950s he spent two years in the UK.

On his return, Woods married Wendy Bruce. They had six children:

Jane, Dillon, Duncan, Gavin, Lindsay, who died in infancy, and Mary.

In 1965, aged 31, Woods was appointed editor of the Daily Dispatch and expanded the readership to include black readers. His friendship with Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko led to the security police monitoring him.

Soon after Biko's murder in 1977, Woods was placed under a five-year ban, stripped of his editorship and subjected to increasing harassment. Finally, he fled SA in 1978. In London, he became an active anti-apartheid spokesman. He was made CBE in 2000 and died in London on August 19 2001. — *DDR*