

My Trip into rural Swaziland: Legacy in Action

Ashley Patton spent nearly seven months serving as a volunteer Administrator at a **cbm** partner eye hospital in Swaziland, the Good Shepherd Hospital Eye Clinic (GSHEC). During her time there, Ashley worked to organize files and keep operations moving. She also took part in a number of cataract case finding trips. These trips involved going out into the most rural locations in Swaziland to find people living with cataracts.

This is her story about one of these trips...

It is a gloriously sunny Friday – the sky is a bright blue above a picturesque skyline. As we drive over the next hill, the scenery opens up to reveal seemingly unending swathes of rolling hills, crowning mountain tops, and careening valleys; all woven together in a tapestry of greens and browns. I can't help but think this is something out of a National Geographic magazine. It's so beautiful, it can't possibly be real.

I am suddenly pulled back to reality as we turn off the main tarred road onto a horrible gravel and dirt road. The going is slow as we bump and jolt our way among what seems like endless potholes



The view from the Good Shepherd cataract case finder van on its way out of the city into the remote regions.



into a rural area of Swaziland. I am brought face-to-face with raw images of hunger and destitution as we make our way to a Swazi homestead. To the right I can see a falling down mud and stick hut where a family lives. The yard has feral dogs, which are thin and sick, scrounging for food as a few chickens wander aimlessly. Ahead, cows block our way forward as they graze on the grass along both sides of the road.

As I survey the impoverished people of Swaziland, I can't help but marvel at their joy. Sitting behind me in the back of our van are seven Swazi men and women. They come from some of the poorest parts of Swaziland and most live in extreme poverty. However, as I listen to them speak to one another, I can hear the joy in their voices. They have been given a great gift, a gift which many thought they'd never receive; the gift of restored sight!

To my left is Sikelela who fearlessly drives us down the rural roads. Sikelela's been the cataract case finder for GSHEC for thirteen years. Dr. Jonathan Pons, the chief ophthalmologist there, originally met Sikelela when he was just a young school boy. Sikelela showed interest so



Backseat in the van. All these people are being driven home from Good Shepherd Eye Hospital after receiving surgery.



Sikelela driving the case finder van through rural Swaziland.

Dr. Pons took him under his wing and mentored him for the position. Dr. Pons helped him obtain a driver's license and sent him to be trained in cataract case finding at an institute in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania.

On returning to Swaziland, Sikelela worked tirelessly to help end curable blindness by setting up networks around Swaziland to identify people with operable cataracts. He trained individuals in communities all over the country to be able to find people with cataracts. Once found, Sikelela arranges to pick up the patient at his or her home. These patients generally live in rural areas where there is little or no public transport to a hospital or eye clinic. In many cases, even if the patient had some access to public transport, they are too destitute to be able to afford the 4 to 8 Rand (45-90 cents) bus fare to get to the hospital, let alone be able to afford the treatment. Not only does Sikelela pick them up and drop them off after the surgery, he also arranges with GSHEC to have their surgeries completely subsidized. This service enables people to receive restored sight who would otherwise not be able to obtain treatment.

Currently, the cataract case finder service is being funded by a generous **cbm** donor family, but there is only enough money to keep it running on a part-time basis, which allows them to find approximately 15 patients per month. With adequate funding, the case finder would be able to go out every week and find more people in need.

After successfully driving past the cows, we come upon a lovely Swazi homestead. The main house is cement and well-maintained. There are mud and stick shacks scattered around the yard; no doubt housing a few animals and perhaps some tools. This is the home of a 99-year-old Gogo (siSwati for 'grandmother'). Her daughter accompanied her on the journey and is overjoyed to see her mother able to see once again. The daughter tells me how her son, the Gogo's grandson, had to feed his grandmother and assist in all daily activities after she went blind 3 years ago. By having the cataract removed, she will now be able to take care of herself and have a much better quality of life. The daughter is extremely grateful for the cataract case finding service and thanks Sikelela, myself, and God for providing for their family.

The grandmother being helped out of the case finder van.



Sikelela standing in front of the Good Shepherd case finder van.



This is me after watching a glaucoma and cataract surgery first hand!

But there are other people she forgot to thank. They are the legacy donors who helped to fund the case finder vehicle. Without it, we wouldn't have been able to drive out and find this grandmother and her family.

So on behalf of this family and the many others whose lives have been changed through restored sight, I want to personally express my thanks to past legacy donors for the generous and selfless gifts they left to **cbm** in their Wills. The choice they made to make a final gift to **cbm** has already impacted, and will continue to impact, the lives of some of the poorest people in the world. When you donate a legacy gift, you're not just giving money, you're helping to give someone their life back.

Someone like this 99-year-old Gogo, who will never forget this life-changing legacy gift.

Ashley Patton
Administrator, Good Shepherd Hospital Eye Clinic