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Isipho binds Atlanta UUs to African village

by Michelle Bates Deakin

THE LYNCHES' SOUTH AFRICAN VACATION was divided into three parts. The first week, Tom and his thirteen-year-old daughter, Miranda, took a four-star safari through the wilds of the African bush. The second week they spent in the remote Zulu village of Inzinga. And the third week they toured in and around the coastal city of Cape Town.

It was the second week that changed their lives. Witnessing the poverty and malnutrition in this Zulu village—in the midst of hospitality like none that Unitarian Universalists Tom and Miranda had ever experienced—altered the course of Miranda's teen years, Tom's career, and the villagers' nutrition and educational opportunities.

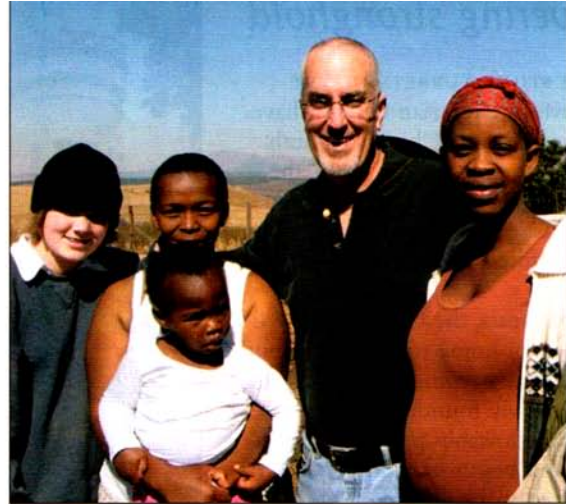
The first week had been a dream. Tom had won a luxury safari at a fundraising auction for Miranda's private school, and in May 2008 Tom and Miranda embarked on the father-daughter trip of a lifetime.

When the safari came to an end, Tom rented a car and they made the harrowing journey over miles of bumpy, unpaved roads to the remote village of Inzinga, which a South African Unitarian had helped them find. There they would be staying with the Zuma family, balancing their luxury safari with a week of service.

When they pulled up to the hut of the Zuma family, Nonjabulo Zuma was cutting firewood with her sisters. Trying to be both chivalrous and a gracious guest, Tom began to help with the sweaty, heavy work. He cut his leg twice chopping wood but soldiered on to help his hosts. Miranda pitched in too, wiping sweat from her freckled face as she strained to pile wood.

The Zumas welcomed the Lynches to their home, preparing a feast for their guests. Sitting on grass mats on the earthen floor, the families ate bread and beans and a fresh-killed chicken from the cast-iron pot.

After dinner, Tom and Miranda stepped outside and looked up at a sky like they had never seen. Tom was moved and at peace. Miranda, however, was not feeling her father's transcendent joy. In twenty-four hours, she'd gone from a lavish safari to seeing her own dinner killed and eating it in a mud hut. "This



COURTESY OF ISIPHO

Atlanta UUs Miranda (left) and her father Tom Lynch have formed a partnership with South Africans Nonjabulo (holding her daughter Amahle) and Nontobeko Zuma and their small village, Inzinga.

is too much for me," she said, sobbing. "I can't do this. Promise we can leave tomorrow."

He comforted her the best he could and hoped that in the light of day, he could help turn her attitude around. He didn't have to. Three-year-old Amahle did.

The next morning, Miranda emerged from the hut to find Amahle waiting for her. Nonjabulo's daughter, Amahle had hidden behind her mother's skirt at dinner. But this morning, she'd had an attitude change. Miranda unpacked her soccer ball, and the girls began to kick it back and forth. In Zulu, Miranda could say only one word, "*Sawubona*," or "hello." But soon she was saying, "Go get it." And she was laughing.

For a week, Amahle and Miranda were glued at the hip. Amahle never did learn to say "Miranda." Instead, she called her *Isipho*, "gift." They were *isipho* to each other.

Miranda began to read to the children in the school, and Tom distributed the hoses and shovels they had brought and helped with the physical work in the village. Many facets of village life troubled him. The village has few adult men. Most have gone to cities to work so they can send money home. Many have been lost to AIDS. The province of KwaZulu-Natal has the highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in the world. As elders die of the disease, so does their knowledge of farming.

Poverty and apartheid have also ravaged the villagers' ability to farm. Under apartheid, 80 percent

of the native population was restricted to less than 13 percent of the land. According to the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC), a South African social justice agency, apartheid law led to farmland overuse, soil erosion, and low productivity. Farming families began to turn to nonagricultural employment. Knowledge and equipment deteriorated, along with farm productivity and nutrition. In Inzinga, like many villages, poverty impeded the villagers' ability to buy seeds, equipment, and fencing. In 2008, residents subsisted primarily on beans and cornmeal.

With Amahle on her hip, Miranda began to fall in love with the people of Inzinga. Each day, she went to the village school, playing games with the children and teaching them their ABCs. The children's passion to learn impressed her. They had none of the props and tools of an American school. The elementary school children had a "grimy ABC chart," she says. The middle-schoolers had a poster with vocabulary words written in large block letters: DISEASE, IMMUNE, PAMPHLET, HIV, AIDS, POLLUTION.

Tom began working with women planting crops at the village's center for orphaned and vulnerable children. Each year, the women planted potatoes, but free-range cattle and chickens were trampling the plants. The women's hard work yielded little.

With the shovels they had brought, Tom and Miranda helped plant potatoes. "They were excited to have the tools," says Tom. "They had a lot of pride and energy. We saw that with the right tools, they could do this for themselves. You take away people's pride and dignity when you make them dependent on your gifts." But these were gifts they could use.



With planting done and school lessons taught, Tom and Miranda became wedding guests. Nonjabulo took them to the neighboring village for a two-day traditional Zulu extravaganza. They danced and sang; Tom drank from the communal bucket of beer; and they feasted on cow and goat. With every hour of the celebration, they felt more connected to their friends in Inzinga. The idea of leaving gave them lumps in their throats.

The day they left the village, Nonjabulo asked, "Will you be coming back?" Miranda, who had wanted to leave on the first night, answered her. "We're coming back."

On the plane from Cape Town to Johannesburg before their flight home, Tom and Miranda uploaded photos from their South African odyssey to a laptop and watched a slideshow of where they'd been.

"We have to find a way to stay connected," Miranda told her dad. "We have to find a way to get more tools and fencing."

They talked about reaching out to nonprofits that might help Inzinga. But Miranda asked, "Why not start our own? We'll call it Isipho."

Tom opened his laptop again in the Johannesburg airport and registered the domain name: isipho.org.

ON THE FLIGHT FROM JOHANNESBURG TO Atlanta, Isipho began to take shape. Without even having heard of the new venture, Sheri Lynch—at home, anticipating the return of her husband and only child—was appointed executive director.

Sheri is a professional organizer and has a background in nonprofit management. For years, she ran camps for children recovering from serious burns. Tom and Miranda were counting on her experience and her skills.

Tom began preparing to tackle the marketing and public relations for Isipho. He has worked as a corporate marketing and advertising executive in Atlanta for decades.

The family began to hold regular business meetings to run the nonprofit. They based their new organization on the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism—"to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

Their goal was to raise money to supply the people of Inzinga with farm tools, fencing, and seeds to help them plant community gardens. They also wanted to provide greater educational opportunities for the children there. "We knew that they did not need a handout, something that replaces their poverty with dependence," says Miranda. "They

needed a hand up. Just a little help getting started.”

The Lynches began a long process of educating themselves on how to find the right tools and seeds for the village. They contacted Cedara Agricultural College in KwaZulu-Natal to learn what kinds of

crops Inzinga could support and what kind of training the college could provide.

They set their sights on a year of fundraising so they could return to Inzinga in 2009 with tools, money, and training. The Lynches began to tap all their friends and family for donations.

Miranda told her story to their church, the UU Congregation of Atlanta, and hosted a fundraising dinner there. The family hosted a wine-tasting party. Donations began to mount. By June, they totaled \$13,000, and the Lynches were ready to return to Inzinga with their gifts.

Miranda met with the chief of staff of the humanitarian organization CARE, based in Atlanta, and the family spoke with experts from the Heifer Project, the Hunger Project, and even people running local

farmers’ markets.

In August 2009, Tom and Miranda returned to Inzinga. Sheri stepped for the first time into the world that had so captivated her daughter and husband.

They arrived with gardening tools, seeds, and fencing materials. The Lynches purchased materials in South Africa to keep the money within the local economy. Some of the donated funds went to providing training in sustenance gardening at Cedara College for twenty villagers. The Lynches and the villagers rolled up their sleeves and began to hoe the brown earth.

Together, they planted 500 square yards of community gardens and forty family gardens. Nonjabulo became the manager of Isipho in the village, working with the Department of Agriculture in South Africa and with the Lynches in Atlanta. One community garden planted at a kindergarten produced vegetables to sell, raising money to buy books.

The proceeds of those first crops provide a glimpse of the self-sustainability that Isipho and the villagers are looking for. “If we’re still doing this in Inzinga ten years from now, we will have failed,” says Tom. “Ideally, we’ll show up in Inzinga five or six years from now, and they won’t need us. Then we’ll go across the valley to another village.”

‘TO GIVE IS TO DISH OUT FOR ONESELF.” It’s a Zulu phrase that has come true for the Lynches.

After starting Isipho, Tom left his corporate marketing career and started a new business, Worthwhile Wine Co., which imports South African wines produced by wineries that are involved in a number of sustainable practices. He also favors companies in the Black Enterprise Empowerment program, which provides equity, training, and opportunity to black South Africans who were disadvantaged during apartheid.

As Tom switched careers, Miranda switched schools. She enrolled in the Ben Franklin Academy, a school with a half-day academic schedule combined with a work program, which allows her to go to school in the mornings and work on Isipho in the afternoons.

“The impact of Isipho on us has been massive,” says Tom. “Our whole family is different.” The Lynches have each evolved into their own role in Isipho. Tom and Miranda like the large, conceptual ideas. Sheri works out the details. Miranda blogs about Isipho and about the experience of being a teenage entrepreneur working with her parents. Annual visits to Africa have become highlights of

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each year. In 2009, the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* named Miranda one of its “20 under 20” leaders of the year.

IN APRIL 2010, NONJABULO CAME TO America for the first time. She became the second person in her village ever to visit America and the first in her family to ride in a plane. “When I am here, I am in my second home,” she says.

Nonjabulo is a soft-spoken woman of 28 with a ready smile. She visited the Lynches’ church and addressed the students at Miranda’s school. She helped host the first major Isipho fundraiser, Celebrating Hope 2010, a dinner and auction that netted just over \$10,000. The money will go a long way toward establishing more gardens in Inzinga and training more families in farming them.

At the dinner, Nonjabulo swallowed her shyness and addressed the audience from the stage. Describing the impact of Isipho, she paused, smiled widely, and said, “Everything is wow!” She has watched the village change as she has helped to implement the Isipho vision. She sees a future for Inzinga as an independent village that can raise

crops and sell them to buy the things they need.

Despite creating and developing Isipho during a crippling recession in the United States, the Lynches are determined to move forward. Many international relief organizations have pulled up stakes from South Africa. Even with the devastating poverty and hunger in areas such as KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa is the most prosperous country in Africa. Yet the gap between its rich and its poor is among the world’s greatest.

So each August, the Lynches will return to plant and to visit with their second family. This year’s trip coincides with Nonjabulo’s wedding. When talk turns to wedding planning, Miranda sounds less like a nonprofit entrepreneur and more like the fifteen-year-old she is. “Zulu weddings are incredible!” she says, her big eyes opening wider. “It’s like a three-day party. It’ll be awesome!” ❖



Michelle Bates Deakin, a UU World senior editor, is the author of Social Action Heroes: Unitarian Universalists Who Are Changing the World, from which this essay is adapted with permission (Skinner House, © 2011 Michelle Bates Deakin).