

Our Daily Bread: COVID-19 Resilience

Since its inception in 2008, The Keiskamma Canada Foundation has partnered with the Keiskamma Trust, a grassroots organization in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. With support from Keiskamma Canada, The Keiskamma Trust continues its important work in the communities in the Eastern Cape that still struggle in the face of endemic poverty, social injustice, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Though the country is currently in lockdown, with very little notice the Keiskamma Trust was able to help vulnerable community members prepare for isolation, and have been in contact with health authorities since the beginning of the epidemic, assisting with raising awareness, and distributing food hampers and essential sanitization supplies.

The Keiskamma Art Project in the village of Hamburg, Eastern Cape, has been a voice for vulnerable communities living alongside the Keiskamma River for twenty years. The Art Project is known for communicating the realities of life with HIV/AIDS, the effects of poverty, but also the effects of hope, in their communities.

COVID-19 threatens the critical livelihoods that the Art Project has been able to provide. In the past few months, in the villages where the women come from who work for the project, work has been impossible, hunger has escalated, and breadwinners have been unable to earn their small, but vital incomes. Local governments and the health system is overwhelmed by the crisis and even food, a most basic human right, is not reaching remote communities like Hamburg.

Their response to COVID-19 is not about struggle, but resilience.

They, and we as their partners in Canada, are asking you to join with us in creating a monumental artwork in response to this crisis that will also provide a livelihood for 55 breadwinners, per month, for six months.

“The process will be split into phases. This first month is a research phase where we are collecting experiences from before and during lockdown, and how we are adapting to this new situation.

‘We will combine illustrations that mirror our experiences in our villages, but also statistics and announcements we have heard in the news, and what we are affected by in neighboring cities. We are still developing our visual language for this tapestry and sharing information as we work towards our imagery,’ say representatives of the Keiskamma Art Project.

The 55 artists involved in the creation of the tapestry don’t want to rush through the process of creating the Covid-19 piece. ‘We want the making of our tapestry to be integrated into our lives, to support us and inspire us during this time.’

Back in 2004, the Keiskamma Altarpiece came about in a similar fashion. The three-panel artwork combined embroidery, beadwork and photographs depicting various situations of life in a community that was highly affected by HIV/Aids. The first panel of embroidery shows elders and children mourning loved ones who lost their lives to Aids-related illness, the second panel door opens to a vibrant life of abundance that is untainted by the threat of death.

As fate would have it, antiretroviral drugs first became available in South Africa during the time when it was being sewn and it’s said that the hopefulness that came with seeing actual recoveries was stitched into the work. On the third panel are two life-sized photographs of local grandmothers with their grandchildren, which represents the strength of grandparents who had to look after orphaned children. The outer panels show scenes of tranquility around the Keiskamma River and mountains, on which the artists memorialised relatives who had passed away.

TOGETHER ALBERTA

Keiskamma Canada Foundation

With this Covid-19-inspired tapestry, The Keiskamma Art Project seeks to emphasise the need for solidarity, using this crisis to become stronger, not only as an art project, but also as a community.

Nombuyiselo Malumbezo, one of the artists on the project, says that 'corona is something [strange] and I am afraid of it even today'. She explains that life under Levels 4 and 5 felt particularly unusual. 'People wearing masks, looking [strange], staying at home, not even going to town, school or work. People were sick from this virus and when you are looking on the television, people are dying. It is painful.'

'In our Covid-19 tapestry, we won't imagine a world without the coronavirus, we know that eventually we will manage the disease. We want to fight it through good health awareness and better education in our communities for now.'

The artwork will become the story of how, working collectively and in community, we can overcome. Art is something that we can work towards and see. It is powerful. It gives visibility and voice to those often marginalized or made invisible.

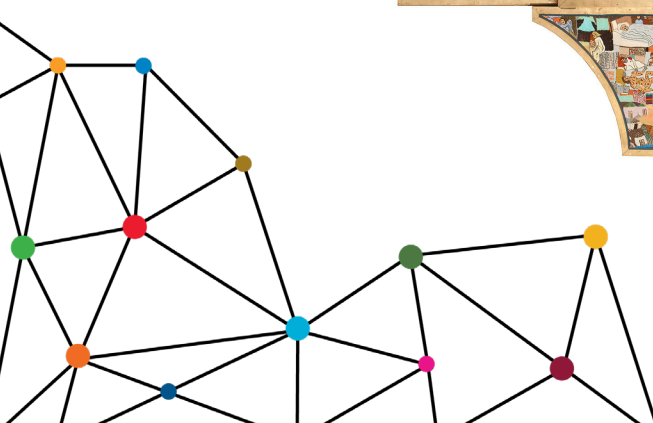
What we need to raise:

\$6,020 CAD (R76 000) per month to support the Keiskamma artists and project, totalling \$36,124 CAD (R456 000) over 6 months to complete our monumental artwork.

Donate to the Art Project: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/keiskamma-canada-foundation-fostering-hope-in-the-face-of-hivaid/>

Citation:

Dlamini-Qwesa, Jabulile. "Powerful portraits of a community: the Keiskama Art Project." *Maverick Life*, June 15 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-15-powerful-portraits-of-a-community-the-keiskama-art->



TOGETHER ALBERTA

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The Keiskamma Altarpiece which depicts the community's struggle with the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the early 2000s.

