

*In 2009, professor Debra Sutton, former JMU Board of Visitors member Renny Humphrey ('84), and a host of American women and JMU students reached out to women in South Africa. For Sutton, it was yet another connection in the continuing global outreach through which she has taught and involved JMU students.*

# W O M E N S U P P O R T I N G W O M E N

There are truly no boundaries to 'being the change'

BY JAN GILLIS ('07, '11P)

On a flight from Tampa, Fla., to Charlotte, N.C., JMU health sciences professor Debra Sutton sparked a conversation with fellow traveler Carolyn Bush. When Sutton mentioned her connection to JMU, Bush responded with a connection of her own — her daughter, Renny Bush Humphrey ('84), was not only a Madison alumna but also a former member of the JMU Board of Visitors (1996–2000). The pair felt an immediate camaraderie and soon Sutton, Bush and Humphrey were friends.

That meeting and subsequent friendship was another thread in the fabric of connection, inspiration and goodwill that Sutton has woven in her JMU career. Beyond teaching students the fundamentals of health and disease prevention, the professor has worked to give students a global perspective flavored with a strong dose of humanity.



**A South African woman chooses a bra from donations from JMU health sciences professor Debra Sutton, her students and many other U.S. women.**

Sutton has conducted a number of Study Abroad programs including trips to South Africa focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention and the specific and sobering challenges confronting the world community in the face of this virulent epidemic. Along the way, Sutton says, "I've seen evidence that everything is connected."

As she got to know the Bush-Humphrey clan, Sutton shared her Study Abroad experiences and a specific ambition for her next trip to South Africa. In the wake of the AIDS devastation in the country, a generation of children has lost parents, and now grandmothers are the primary caregivers. "We had brought things for the kids and

spent a lot of time with the children; but I thought it would be nice to bring something for women," Sutton says.

She asked Eunice Mangwane, who works at the Umtha Welanga Health Care Center in Hamburg,





After bringing JMU students to South Africa several times to get hands-on learning in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatments, health science professor Debra Sutton said she noticed a whole generation of children had lost parents. "More grandmothers are now primary caregivers, and it was time to do something nice for these women," says Sutton.

BE *the* CHANGE

South Africa, and who, along with other members of the Keiskamma Gospel Choir, visited JMU in December 2008, what she could do to show appreciation to these women.

The answer? Bras.

The fundamental garment of Western women's wardrobes is a luxury in a country where many struggle against poverty and disease to simply survive.

Sutton went right to work. "I called the effort 'women supporting women,'" she says. "Every woman knows how important this element is in her wardrobe, and I set out to collect some bras to take to South Africa on my next trip." Word of her collection drive soon spread.

Humphrey says, "It started with my mother going to her Sunday school class of older ladies at the Second Branch Baptist Church here in Chesterfield, Va., and telling them about Dr. Sutton. The project was something they could offer; something that was not expensive. Gently used bras could be recycled and given to women in another country who would really appreciate them." Soon, other neighborhood women heard about the project. Contributions abounded.

"The program is not just about undergarments," Humphrey explains. Sutton and her students teach basic health skills to South African children. "I saw in our church 5-, 6- and 7-year-olds saying to their moms 'we've got to buy extra toothpaste.' I'd go to church, and there would be a grocery bag of toothpaste for people in South Africa."

At every turn there were more contributors. "Dentists Reed Prugh and Albert Sasala donated toothpaste and toothbrushes," says Bush, "Renny and I were only the helping hands to Dr. Sutton."

The involvement with an initiative by a JMU professor was especially compelling for Humphrey. "It had been a few years since I had engaged old friends on campus when I attended the Centennial Celebration in 2008," she says. "Every memory came back. President Rose told us to 'Be the Change, be what JMU does for the next 100 years.' Not six months later my mom is on a plane with a Madison professor who is being the change. I knew I had to have a part in this."

Others at JMU and beyond felt the same way. By the time Sutton was ready to embark on her summer 2009 Study Abroad program in South Africa, 650 bras had been collected. A significant portion were contributions taken by Katy

Janousek ('07), a former graduate assistant of Sutton's who traveled to South Africa to work with Sutton and her students. Janousek, the sexual health coordinator for the University of Georgia's health center, was excited to be going abroad for the first time and eager to share in Sutton's "women supporting women" effort.

People responded generously to Janousek's drive. In fact, she even received new garments. "I wanted to leave the tags



**(Above): Health science professor Debra Sutton and her Study Abroad students with donations to the "women supporting women" effort. Front row (l-r): Hunter Bedard, Elly Hart, Cristen Cravath, Jillian DiCicco and Erika Cober. Back row (l-r): Elise Stephenson, Emma Biron, Whitney Hodgen, Debra Sutton, Katelin Mikuta and Melissa Mehring. (Left): Emma Biron ('10) says the Study Abroad experience taught her the value of teaching skills to empower people.**



on the bras because I thought it would be nice for the women in South Africa to know that they were getting something brand new."

No good deed goes unpunished. Janousek's suitcase of 257 bras was detained by customs in South Africa. "They thought I was going to be selling them," she says. Explanations and appeals seemed to fall on deaf ears, so Janousek left her piece of confiscated luggage behind and went out to do field work with Sutton and the JMU students.

The group focused on child health and wellness. "We had a tremendous amount of dental supplies donated, so we were able to go to different preschools and work with the children, teaching them [to brush]," says Janousek. A simple skill, yet one that would yield a lifetime of benefit for the children.

JMU students received their own benefit — two weeks of experience that will translate into a lifetime of change. "Students are at a particularly impressionable age," Janousek says. "Perceptions gained from seeing a different culture during that Study Abroad program will stay with them as they begin to navigate their careers."

**As we arrived in a village, we were greeted by a group of grandmothers who sang and danced to express their joy at having visitors. That was before we even gave them any donations.'**

— KATY JANOUSEK ('07), *Study Abroad volunteer*



Emma Biron ('10), a JMU dietetics major, says that the Study Abroad opportunity allowed her to see the value of teaching people skills to help them solve problems. "In that way you empower people to continue to work to find solutions," she says. For Biron the trip was a confidence booster. "I've been thinking about joining the Peace Corps after graduation. Now I know I can do it."

Janousek credits the experience with deepening her own cultural perception. After being in the field for several weeks, she returned to the international customs office at the airport to engage in some strategic cross-cultural communication.

"I stayed calm and polite, which was fresh on my mind after being in rural Africa," says Janousek.

"A cultural difference between Africa and America is that Africans see rushing people along, trying to get them to hurry, as insulting. I stayed back in customs about an hour and a half waiting and being polite," she says. Janousek brought copies of flyers she had distributed. "I showed the officials that I had asked for new or slightly used items. The words 'HIV relief' and 'donation to women' did the trick." Janousek got her luggage back, and all 257 bras.

The reception the group received in its visits in rural South Africa made the hard work of collection, transport and negotiation for the "women supporting women" effort worthwhile. Sutton, Janousek and Biron all remember a poignant moment in South Africa. "As we arrived in a village, we

**(Above): South African grandmothers greet their visitors with a dance. (Right): Katy Janousek ('07) works with South African friends and children.**

were greeted by a group of grandmothers who sang and danced to express their joy at having visitors. That was before we even gave them any donations," says Janousek.

"The idea that they were special enough that women would come all the way from America to their village was really meaningful to them," Sutton explains. In fact, more than garments, the bras signified a meaningful human connection. "I told the women that when they are feeling low, the bras would lift their spirits," Sutton says. "Those women in South Africa were amazed that women in America would care enough about them to give them something that was just for them personally."

In the end, more than garments passed hands. The affirmation to South African women that their hard work on behalf of their extended families is seen and appreciated by women half a world away is the real gift. As Humphrey says, "When it comes to being the change, there truly are no boundaries." ❧

