According to the UNAIDS 2006 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, 5.5 million humans were living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa at the end of 2005, of whom almost 1,000 died from HIV/AIDS every day. The international HIV/AIDS charity, AVERT (previously known as the AIDS Education and Research Trust), reports that the most rapid increase in South Africa's HIV/AIDS prevalence was between 1993 and 2000, when the country was distracted by major political changes which ended apartheid. This impact of HIV/AIDS on South Africa was unnoticed until a major epidemic had transpired.

The Amy Biehl Foundation Trust (ABFT) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working with South Africans to overcome the HIV/AIDS epidemic. According to the ABFT website, Amy Biehl was born in 1967 in Newport Beach, California, graduated from Stanford University with honors in International Relations, and was a Fulbright exchange scholar at the University of Western Cape Community Law Center in South Africa in 1992. Her scholarship was committed to the establishment of a multiracial democracy in a country ruled by apartheid since 1948. Amy worked with members of the African National Congress (ANC) developing voter registration programs for South Africans who had been disenfranchised by apartheid as the nation's first free elections approached in April 1994.

A few days before she had planned to return to the United States, Amy was murdered by a mob returning to the Guguletu Township from an anti-government rally.

On the testimony of 3 women from the township, 4 young men were convicted and sentenced to 18 years imprisonment for Amy's murder. The men applied for amnesty when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1995. Amy's
parents actively participated in the Commission's hearings and supported amnesty for the youths. Amy Biehl's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, created the Amy Biehl Foundation in the United States in 1994 and its sister organization, the ABFT, in South Africa in 1997. The Foundation's mission is to prevent youth violence in socio-economically disadvantaged communities around Cape Town. It has established non-violence and educational programs to empower youth in townships around Cape Town.

In 2000, the ABFT HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program was established as a means for young adults to teach their peers, children, and other members of their communities about the dangers and concerns related to HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS Coordinators from the ABFT choose 24 high school student leaders annually for the HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program.

In this program, level 1 equips student leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary to become peer educators. Weekly workshops with coordinators encourage education and discussion about various issues, such as relationships, sexuality, self esteem, and gender/racial inequality, and address how the HIV/AIDS epidemic is interconnected to these and other major social concerns. Level 2 encourages peer educators to lead HIV/AIDS workshops in their communities with information acquired in level 1.

Also in 2000, ABFT staff, through other community
projects, recognized the need for factual information for high-risk adults to correct the myths that surround HIV/AIDS in township areas. Amy's Tavern Project was created to educate shebeen and tavern owners and patrons on the importance of condoms and HIV/AIDS prevention techniques. The project supplements the ABFT's HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program by educating an older generation about the disease.

ABFT currently distributes materials to approximately 200 establishments in and around South African townships. In addition to handing out 5 to 6,000 HIV/AIDS informational materials and condoms each month, the ABFT presents HIV/AIDS prevention workshops in the shebeens and taverns.

The ABFT HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program and Amy's Tavern Project help individuals distinguish specific behaviors that place them at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS as well as what realistic alternatives to such manners may be available. The coordinators and peer educators seek to give South Africans information necessary to make positive decisions and constructive lifestyle changes.

The ABFT needs money for educational projects, such as the HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program and Amy's Tavern Project.

The Amy Biehl Foundation in the United States is committed to fundraising initiatives for ABFT. The ABFT is also in the process of attaining accredited status for its HIV/AIDS Peer Education Program through the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) which will enable the foundation to benefit from the vast financial services the South African Department of Labor has to offer. The foundation primarily relies on public donations, such as free condoms for Amy's Tavern Project provided by the Western Cape Province Health Department, and private donations from the general population to continue their work of helping South Africans in need.

*By L Scoz*