Article

## "uBuciko BamaZulu aKwaZulu": A Curatorial Care and **Emotional Engagement in Zulu Art**

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Abstract: Background: The vibrant isiZulu exhibition "uBuciko bamaZulu aKwaZulu" was created specifically to commemorate Africa Month. It was on display at the Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum from May 30 to July 31, 2025. It included the diverse artistic talents of Thabani Zulu (spray painter), Mantombi Mkhwanazi (beader), Thobani Mthethwa (draughtsman), Xolani Qwabe (mixed media artist) and Willis Nxumalo (sculptor) from Empangeni, KwaZulu Natal. Purpose: The exhibition sought to facilitate cultural exchange, artistic dialogue, and community-student engagement, exploring themes of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. It aimed to address historical imbalances in South Africa's art world and enhance the visibility of local artists. Methods: This study employed practice-led research that integrated curators' emotional engagement and curatorial care for the artworks and exhibition setting, as well as practical participation by students. Results: This study bridged a gap between artists and the community, by creating a supportive environment that celebrated and preserved Zulu Art. Educational components, such as artist talks and walkabouts that were integrated into the exhibition program, provided opportunities for knowledge sharing and skill development. Conclusion: This study aspired to be more than just an art exhibition; it aimed to be a catalyst for cultural revitalization, artistic empowerment, and community cohesion, celebrating the enduring power and beauty of Zulu artistic expression during Africa Month and beyond.

Keywords: Ubuciko; Curatorial care; Emotional engagement; Decolonization; Zulu art

## 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research Background

The partnership between the University of Zululand's (UNIZULU), Department of Creative Art and the Empangeni Arts and Cultural History Museum has been established to create an on-going exhibitions programme that will strongly promote and celebrate a variety of authentic Zulu Art by concentrating on important cultural holidays such as Africa Month, Youth Month, and Heritage Month, just to name a few. In a multicultural culture, this is essential for promoting respect, understanding, and national identity.

A museum is according to Uwase (2025), "a building or place for keeping artistic and scientific objects and displaying them to the public". The partnership was realized because the museum is in most cases; unengaged and unpopular in displaying art to the community of Empangeni. This temporary exhibition contributed to creating better recognition and engagement with artistic creativity within a heritage site. In addition, Rajan (2024) emphasizes that museums play an important role in keeping and displaying our shared heritage's riches, and this study looks thoroughly into "The Function of Museums in Preserving and Displaying Cultural Heritage via Art" to shed light on this critical role. Many people regard museums as the guardians of our

intangible and tangible cultural legacy because of their role in conserving cultural memory. The basis of this partnership is to make use of the museum for its purpose as a heritage site as well as draw an audience related to the culture and those unrelated to learn from the setting.

According to an online website, the Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum, which is in the Old Town Hall was built in 1916 by sugar farmers on the common or general-purpose land in the center of town. It is one of Empangeni's three remaining historically significant buildings (Southern African Place website, 2024). Unfortunately, there is insufficient scientific or academic literature regarding the museum as a heritage site and as one of the few remaining historical buildings, the museum is rarely crowded or is well-used. In the words of museum assistant Mr. Gwamanda (2025) who emphasized the lack of financial support from the local municipality. This is evident because the museum is highly active and visible through the partnership it has with the university.

This partnership was instigated to create exhibitions to dismantle the research gap on the lack of agency for the artists in the museum as well as the classification of bead work and weaving as fine art. As well as the museum becoming a social space for business opportunities. This is confirmed by Kovalenko and Martynyshyn (2023) as follows: The exhibition business is an integral part of the life of society, as well as one of the factors that significantly affects the formation of the future outline of the world community. It is not only a source of information about the development of the country, region, industry, individual enterprises, but also an effective marketing tool of intercultural communication, where in personal contact with a partner the exhibitor can identify his needs, that is, convey to them a significant amount of useful information, thereby ensuring in the future a source of income for themselves. In the case of this study, the partnership is then between the museum and the curator and or the artist. This allows for the exhibition to be useful to promote the work of local artists through the museum and curator networking connections. Greenberg et al. (1996) affirms that exhibitions have emerged as critical spaces of cultural interchange, where meaning is created, sustained, and dismantled.

In addition to expanding the museum's prominence and visibility, the university-museum relationship aims to provide artists with a larger audience for potential revenue opportunities because "exhibitions have proven to be an effective tool of marketing communication" (Kovalenko & Martynyshyn, 2023).

This is the first exhibition celebrating Africa Month titled, the ubuciko BamaZulu aKwaZulu exhibition officially opened on the last day of May 2025 until 31 July 2025 at the Empangeni Art and Cultural Museum. The exhibition was displayed by curator, Lindelwa Pepu (a visual arts lecturer) and co-curator, Lesiba Phahladira (anthropology lecturer), colleagues from the University of Zululand.

This exhibition makes a scholarly contribution by incorporating two pillars of a lecturer's duty that are teaching and learning and community engagement. This was to help promote the work of local artists while including university students, to learn how exhibitions and curatorial practice. The exhibition featured artists who were reflecting and conveying what it means to be a Zulu African artist from (Empangeni), South Africa, as a translation to the exhibition title.

The exhibition opening night featured most of the artists that are (fig.1) Willis Nxumalo, Xolani, Qwabe, Mantombi Mkhwanazi, Thobani Mthethwa. Thabani Zulu who was unable to make it. The exhibition was entirely in isiZulu for the audience to engage in meaningful conversations with the artists themselves.



Figure 1: Willis Nxumalo, Xolani Qwabe, Mantombi Mkhwanazi and Thobani Mthethwa Source: Photo by M. Thwala, Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

The decision to engage and present the exhibition exclusively in isiZulu allowed each artist to connect with their authenticity and origin, which is what Africa Month is all about: "celebrating who you are". As mentioned earlier, the museum is under-utilized and has minimal contribution to local artists-as such, the museum-university partnership focuses on creating an active cultural space as well as decolonizing curation. In the process this exhibition aimed to address the following.

## 1.2 Research Question and Objectives

Against the backdrop of the museum's underutilization and local artists' lack of visibility, this study addresses two core research questions: How can a partnership between a university and a museum revitalize a historical but underutilized cultural space and effectively promote local artists? In what ways can a curatorial practice focus on indigenous languages and narratives?

To answer these questions, the study sets two key objectives: First, to increase the visibility and significance of the Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum, and to provide a wider audience for local artists (potentially leading to business ventures). Second, to challenge colonial impositions and re-center indigenous narratives by highlighting artistic manifestations in isiZulu, thereby promoting authenticity and a deeper understanding of Zulu culture.

"uBuciko BamZulu aKwaZulu", which translates to "Art of the Zulu People of KwaZulu Natal," was chosen for the exhibition's inclusion of works of art made by Zulu people from a particular region of KwaZulu Natal, in this instance Empangeni. The words "ubuciko bamaZulu" means creativity or Art of the Zulu People to create profundity and significance behind the meaning of the exhibition and the essence of the creativity that was produced with distinction, precision, and originality.

The university-museum partnership also seeks to transform the museum into a space that embodies the vision quoted by Velandia Pirazan (2025) from Museum Next (2024): "non-Tribal museums have incorporated collaborative practices in decision-making, co-curation and community engagement to address the demands of Indigenous communities who have faced racism, lack of representation and invisibilization of their culture for centuries". This project aims to showcase native traditions and the art of Black artists in the community—addressing the historical reality that museums have long focused on the history and ethnicity of white people.

Moreover, Kovalenko and Yaroslav Martynyshyn (2023) believe that the goal of an exhibition activity is to locate new consumers, strengthen relationships with existing ones, and ultimately sign contracts with them for the sale of goods and the creation of cross-cultural relationships. Furthermore, this exhibition addressed one of the important impacts of offering social services to communities in need without seeking any gain in return (Saidi & Boti, 2021). "One of the distinctive features of museums as civic spaces is the importance, complexity, and rewards of engagement with community in which they are situated" (Uwase, 2025).

In addition, the exhibition's title and overall setting were designed to decolonize museum practice. As Bacci (2024) explains: "Decolonizing a museum entails widening or dismantling the artistic canon, sharing the control of the interpretation and storytelling of artworks with those whose culture generated them, and whose narrations rarely find a public expression and a wide audience – and even these challenging commitments may just begin to scratch the surface of the issue, since every national context requires a tailored approach for the achievement of proper reparation." It is imperative, in my opinion, to establish a venue where artists feel free to discuss their work to gain insight and uncover their inspirations and influences. This is related to this study because the artists represented their work independently.

#### 2. Research Methods

## 2.1 Curatorial Care

This study adopted the method curatorial care which categorizes under practice-led research because "a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge" (Candy, 2006). In the case of this study, the artefact is the exhibition "that is carried out by "practitioners who are writers and or curators" the author being both. Candy (2006) also confirms that practice-based research is original research conducted to gain new information, partially through practice and the results of that practice. Claims of originality and contribution to knowledge can be proved by creative products such as photos, music, designs, models, digital media, or performances and exhibitions. While the relevance and context of the statements are presented in words, full insight can only be gained by directly referencing those outcomes.

This study is based on an exhibition that is an original contribution as it has never been displayed anywhere before which included a presentation of Zulu artworks. This practice-led research is the basis of curatorial care which was implemented during the setting of the display and for the participation of visual arts students from UNIZULU. The students participated in the curatorial practice and display because exhibitions are categorized as research in museums for "Knowledge-in-the-making" (Bjerrgaard, 2020). Comparatively, as one of the fundamental museum professions, curating is typically seen as the practice through which knowledge is produced in the museum (Anderson, 2005; Lehmann-Brauns et al., 2010; Message & Witcomb, 2015; O'Neill, 2006; Pringle, 2020; Thomas, 2010, 2016).

The students gained knowledge on how to hang and the purpose and reasoning behind the alignment, handling and placement of artworks. This then corresponds with what practice-led research is as well as what Nelson (2013) states that it is practice-as-research which requires "doing-thinking". While the students were guided, they were required to use their common sense in the display process. This is a particular mode of curating that "the hands-on level of exhibition-making, occupied with installation, funding and publicness" (Sheikh, 2019).

## 2.2 Emotional Engagement

This study also incorporated emotional engagement, considering each artist's unique work and style, and how the audience could connect with the artworks. As Munro (2014) argues, museums are emotional spaces: emotions emerge in interactions

between visitors (as they move around, discuss exhibitions, or chat in the café), and in interactions between visitors and museum objects (we often speak of loving certain exhibitions or hating others). Munro's point about the impact of emotions in museum spaces is particularly relevant here.

As curators, we focused on fostering connections between each artist and their work—specifically by identifying each artist by name—to increase their visibility for potential business opportunities. This aligns with Gadsby's (2011) view that museums are in "the experience business".

# 3. Practical Process, Outcomes, and Core Perspective Analysis of the Zulu Art Exhibition

## 3.1 Spatial Presentation and Curatorial Practice

According to McCartney (2015), curate derives from the Latin curare; to care, to guard, or to protect. As curators of a simple space such as the Empangeni Art and Cultural Museum interior (fig. 2) with standard lights that can be turned on across the space at once. This required the curators to carefully consider how to make the display interesting and welcoming to visitors.

This approach reflects O'Neil's (2007) description of curators as "artists, modifying exhibitions by changing the environment, the lighting, the labels, and the placement of other works of art". Figure 2 shows two views of the museum's interior: the first frame is from the doorway, and the second from the lower-left corner of the entrance—both highlighting the display clearly.



Figure 2: uBuciko BamaZulu Exhibition display (frame 1-is taken from the doorway and frame 2- is taken from lower left corner of the entrance)

Source: Photo by L. Pepu., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

One of the major challenges in organizing this exhibition included working with a limited number of artworks from Xolani Qwabe, Thabani Mthethwa, Willis Nxumalo and Thabani Zulu were also preparing for a group display elsewhere. As curators we had to be creative and pro-active which Arnold (2009) states as a "magician's" act, which is the act of bringing out "strange goods." Thus, temporary display, and the criteria of classification that it embodies, may be described, to a great extent, as subjective, rather than objective, while the curator's role and identity resemble that of a magician's (Kaniari, 2014). This aligns with Kovalenko and Martynyshyn's (2023) observation: "The complexity of research in this area is determined by the fact that an exhibition is a space created by a person for the purpose of presenting ideas, objects, things created by other people for their presentation to the audience. Since both the organization of the

exhibition space itself and the selection of exhibited objects are carried out in accordance with the ideas, tasks and goals of the exhibition, it can be said that the exhibition is a subjective image of the objective world, a materialized representation of some ideas of it."

To address this challenge, we leveraged our expertise as curators from different fields (visual art and anthropology) to collaborate on selecting and arranging the pieces. As Rajan (2024) notes: "Exhibitions are built by curators, who create stories that go beyond physical location and time. They weave background, meaning, and cultural importance into the artistic and historical symphony by meticulous selection and arrangement." It is always important to take the exhibition's goals into account while also paying attention to how the theme should be represented collectively on the display. For instance, it was appropriate to place the welcome statement (fig. 3) at the museum's entrance so that guests can read, consider, and analyses it to better understand the purpose of the exhibition. The welcome statement addressed the theme and exhibition focus as well as the purpose of the exhibition and acknowledging each artist by name.



Figure 3: Welcome Statement, translated by Professor S.L Ntuli Source: Photo by M. Thwala., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

The welcome statement is translated as follows: "Welcome to an exhibition that is exclusively embracing Africa Month. The selected creative works feature artistic talents in paintings, drawings, beadwork and sculpting of Zulu artists based in Empangeni, KwaZulu Natal. This exhibition is a platform to showcase uBuciko Bamazulu aKwaZulu. The exhibition's core objective lies beyond a static display of artworks. It aims to create a dynamic space for cultural exchange, community engagement, and artistic dialogue. The featured works explore themes of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity, offering viewers a nuanced understanding of AmaZulu akwaZulu. Allow yourself to take some time and engage and embrace the work of umama Mantombi Mkhwanazi (beadwork); ubaba uThabani Zulu (spray paintings); ubaba uWillis Nxumalo (Sculptures); uThabani Mthethwa (drawings) and Xolani Qwabe (paintings). One of the primary goals of this display was to enforce the meaning of Africa Month by not including the English translation, which required visitors to interact with or learn isiZulu. Following the welcoming wall text, the display image below (fig. 4) features the four artists who, in our opinion, complemented and enhanced the area."



Figure 4: Central view of the exhibition setting Source: Photo by M. Thwala., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

We chose to put Mr. Mthethwa's drawings of Zulu traditional musicians, such as Isilomo Somculo wesintu Lihlobe Ngengulule, who makes Zulu music and traditional clothing fashionable, and Uswenka Oswenka Nge'spenetu Wachothoza uQwabe, a Zulu man who takes pride in making Zulu accessories fashionable, on the far-left side of the wall. As his artworks titled Intombi yoMzulu and Intombi yomzulu Itshitshi Phaqa, which depict Zulu maiden females, communicate to one another and balance gender, they were placed exactly across from his other pieces, giving the impression that the arrangement was harmonious and complementary. This display's middle pieces are the spray paintings by Mr. Zulu on the wall, which was chosen for its vibrant colours. The two elderly women on the right, uMama woXhosa and uMaasai, are both women who represent respect and royalty in their respective cultures, and the central piece, Itshitshi, is comparable to the art pieces by Mr. Mthethwa.

It was perfect to set the Mr. Nxumalo sculptures on the display stands as we moved along with the setting. The purpose of positioning the three female sculptures, such as Inkosazana ye Afrika, in a triangle was to create an engaging and interactive display with the pieces evenly spaced and ample space surrounding them which are also comparable to Mr. Zulu's spray painting of the royal black women. Additionally, these sculptures were situated precisely across from Mr. Nxumalo's other three animal sculptures such as, uFudu Luhamba (fig. 5), which he made emphasis that it is an animal native to KwaZulu Natal and is likewise exhibited in a triangle shape that is directly aligned with the women sculptures to also create balance or a conversation between human and animals because "humans are animals" (Bradshaw,2021).



Figure 5: Willis Nxumalo, uFudu Luhamba (2018) Source: Photo by M. Thwala., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum

The table's placement in the center of the museum also provided balance to the area which allowed visitors to interact with Mrs. Mkhwanazi's beaded artwork, such as ishongololo that she named, also known as a millipede, an animal with a thousand legs, served as the inspiration for her neck item with a lot of small pieces, which is similar. Finally, we arranged Mr. Qwabe's paintings on the wall opposite the exhibition statement as shown on (fig. 6). They are mostly themed as works that depict the lives of regular South African people who work hard and sell goods on the street to earn a living. These works are relatable for people who take public transportation.



Figure 6: Interior setting of exhibition showing Mr. Qwabe's work Source: Photo by L. Pepu., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

One of Mr. Qwabe's paintings always received remarks and questioning (fig.7) on how it was relevant to the theme of Africa month because of his inclusion of Barrack Obama. Mr. Qwabe indicated that he was illustrating the first black male presidents, who had a significant impact on the people they led. He also stated that Barack Obama's father is of Kenyan descent, a country in East Africa. This made the work suitable yet unique from his collection.



Figure 7: Xolani Qwabe., Izingqunqulu zase Afrika (2009) Source: Photo by M. Thwala., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum

## 3.2 Practical Outcomes and Feedback of the Exhibition

This exhibition was well received and supported by ICORA (fig.8), a local radio station that helped promote the event by also participating in the opening to encourage locals to visit the museum. This collaboration enhanced the exhibition's community reach.



Figure 8: Interview at ICORA FM Source: Photo by P. Mhlongo., Empangeni (2025)

Hosting a local school also encouraged a partnership for the near future with the school to impact learning about local art and integrating it into the curriculum to teach about and celebrate local artists. The initiative of including university students (fig.9) in the planning has also encouraged students interested in visual arts to pursue postgraduate studies in museum education such as curatorship and to continue practicing visual arts as well as to seek participation in national competitions around the country.



Figure 9: Visual Arts students participating in curatorial practice Source: Photo by L. Pepu., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

The UNIZULU final year visual arts class (fig.10) was invited to also have an engagement with the artists and learn the culture and practices of a museum and curating as an experience that has never occurred before this was an eye-opening and fruitful outing for the students. This collaboration not only enhances educational experience but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the cultural heritage within the community.



Figure 10: Visual Arts students engaging with Mr. Nxumalo and his art Source: Photo by L. Pepu., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

The exhibition also laid the groundwork for future partnerships with local schools: hosting a local school during the exhibition allowed for discussions about integrating local art into the curriculum. Mr. Nxumalo (fig. 11) and Mr. Zulu (fig.12) engaged with the learners to enlighten them about their art and the meaning behind it. The learners participated enthusiastically, asking insightful questions and expressing their interpretations. This interaction promoted an appreciation for the artwork and its significance, bridging the gap between the artists and the younger generation. The positive feedback from the teacher highlighted the importance of integrating local culture into the curriculum. This initiative not only encouraged an appreciation for art but also encouraged the learners to think critically about their heritage and its relevance to today's society.



Figure 11: Mr. Nxumalo engages with learners from a local school Source: Photo by Z. Nxumalo., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)



Figure 12: Mr. Nxumalo engages with learners from a local school Source: Photo by Z. Nxumalo., Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum (2025)

## 3.3 Core Perspective Analysis

This exhibition explored three value perspectives based on the practical process and outcome of the display.

#### 1) Curatorial Care

Rooted in the core connotation of the Latin term "curare" (to care, to guard) as defined by McCartney (2015), curatorial care centers on the careful handling and condition maintenance of artworks. In this exhibition, the curatorial team, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives of visual art and anthropology, achieved the harmony and appreciation of artistic presentation through rational artwork layout, lighting adjustment, and classified display, despite the limited space and infrastructure of the Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum. Furthermore, this concept extended to practical education: visual arts students from UNIZULU were deeply involved in hanging artworks, arranging displays, and venue setup. Through "doing-thinking" (Nelson, 2013), they mastered curatorial logic and artwork care skills—practicing Bjerrgaard's (2020) notion of "exhibition as knowledge-in-the-making" while facilitating the intergenerational transmission of curatorial techniques, embodying dual responsibilities for artistic heritage and professional inheritance.

## 2) Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement echoes Munro's (2014) assertion that "museums are emotional spaces," with its core lying in building deep connections among "artists-audiences-culture." The exhibition adopted isiZulu as the sole display language, compelling visitors to engage with the local cultural context through linguistic interaction and enhancing emotional resonance with identity. In the artwork arrangement, designs such as the symmetrical placement of gender-themed works and the triangular alignment of human and animal sculptures created a "sense of dialogue" between artworks, guiding visitors to perceive the concept of balance in Zulu culture. Additionally, by clearly labeling artists' names and presenting the narratives of identity and belonging behind the works, the curatorial team allowed visitors to directly engage with the creators' inspirations and thoughts—transforming art appreciation from a

visual experience to emotional acceptance of individual artists and Zulu culture, which aligns with Gadsby's (2011) view of museums as "the experience business."

## 3) Decolonization

The decolonization value focuses on implementing Bacci's (2024) idea of "the return of cultural interpretation rights," breaking the artistic norms and narrative hegemony formed during the colonial period. The exhibition achieved decolonization through two key approaches: first, it excluded English translations and prioritized isiZulu in exhibition narratives, placing the indigenous language at the core and correcting the colonial legacy of museums long centered on Western languages. Second, it focused on local artists from Empangeni, breaking the preference for artists from mainstream institutions in the South African Art world and providing a platform for marginalized creators—addressing the historical imbalance where indigenous art was overlooked. This practice of reconstructing museum functions through indigenous narratives not only highlighted the authenticity of Zulu culture but also transformed museums from "containers of colonial heritage" into carriers of indigenous cultural revitalization, endowing non-Western art with equal rights to cultural expression.

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

## 4.1 Conclusion and Implication of Study

The core purpose of this study was realized through the practice-led approach that are, emotional and curatorial care intertwined with practical student participation. Indeed, the exhibition represented a much-needed dynamic space for cultural exchange and artistic dialogue that bridged gaps between artists and community. Most importantly, the original exhibition "uBuciko BamaZulu aKwaZulu" represented a seminal work in attempting to redress historical imbalances within the South African Art world by providing an important platform for previously neglected local artists to gain visibility and contribute directly to the ongoing evolution of Zulu artistic expression.

This impact becomes embedded through the integrated educational components: knowledge is shared and developed as competencies that continue beyond the date of the exhibition. It was a testament to the enduring power and beauty of Zulu artistic expression. As such, it accomplished all it had set out to be not just an exhibition, but a foundation of artistic empowerment and community cohesion that will continue beyond its run at the Empangeni Art and Cultural History Museum.

## 4.2 Limitations and Achievements

As previously stated, the overall anticipated results of the exhibition setting were limited because most of the artists: Mantombi Mkhwanazi, Thabani Zulu, Xolani Qwabe, and Willis Nxumalo had commitments to exhibit elsewhere. Most of their pieces, which would have significantly influenced the exhibition's theme, were left out or even taken down from the exhibit, changing the original scene. This, in my opinion, has affected most visitors' views, who have commented that the display seemed empty while the culture and understanding of a museum setting is limited in the area. Conversely people will always share different views, either negative or positive ones, which is meant to contribute to the learning and growing process.

As one of main objectives of this exhibition project, the primary limitation, however, is that not having enough schools visit the museum as planned. Most schools were unable to schedule visits for their visual arts learners due to extremely hectic schedules and the long process for applying for permission from the department of Education until it became school break. Nonetheless, the exhibition opening was well received, and the theme was well received and explored by a local school.

While a minimum number of artworks were bought, the artists gained valuable recognition through social media and within the university community. This exhibition has created an opportunity for the university to incorporate this initiative into upcoming university events across the year, enabling a local and national audience to appreciate art and have potential purchases.

## 4.3 Ethical Consideration

The Empangeni Art and Cultural Museum has an ethically approved partnership with UNIZULU's Department of Creative Art, which allowed for the setting of this exhibition. Every participating artist aspires to get recognition and grow their network and business partnerships. Each artist is in-person for consent whether they agree to have their names used for personal identification.

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