

Mid-May, 2010. It is 10 a.m. and Lettie de Klerk Laerskool's uniformed pupils are playing in the Nieu Bethesda autumn sun. Dusty shoes are to be expected; this is the Karoo. Pupils huddle together and spoon food from plastic plates. A younger child rinses her empty plate under the yard tap. She must, for there are only 30 plates, 200 children to feed, and the next 'shift' is hungry. There is some horseplay but, given that so many pupils are temporarily free from their classroom confines, noise levels seem to lack the element of childish spontaneity.



In fact, this scene is a minor miracle:

WHEN EDUCATION FAILS

In October 2009, some of the pupils at this primary school were already 16 years old. At least 90% of the children across the board could neither read nor write at the level designated for their age group. They could not do basic sums – could not, in fact, work in units of 10. The attendance register reflected that every teacher had achieved a 100% attendance record; in reality, one teacher had only been in the classroom for 11 of the preceding 45 school days. At 9 a.m. on some days, unsupervised classes would indicate the nearby tavern when asked where the teachers were.

The principal's office doubled up as the staff room, in itself a sectioned-off area of a classroom. The 'computer' was actually a monitor, because the CPU and printer were at a teacher's house. There was no fax machine. The phone had been disconnected as a result of the astronomical, unpaid telephone account, the itemised records of which included calls to the Sudan. One of the teachers had stolen every cent of the school's funding allocation from the Department of Education, (in excess of R 50 000). She was subsequently found guilty in a court of law but in May 2010, was still employed by the Department and set to take over as acting Principal while the Principal herself was away writing Honours exams.



There was no sports equipment and teaching aids were almost non-existent. Classroom walls were unadorned and unpainted. There was no running water. In 2005, the toilets had been condemned but nothing had been done to clean them up. Based on the bucket system, they were still overflowing and the stench permeated the school grounds. Those children who turned up for school used trees and bushes for their toilet. Some went home to the toilet, or for water, but usually did not bother to return. Pupils wore casual clothes to school.

Such pupils as came to school often sat without tuition in their classrooms, hour after hour, day after day. The Department's official teacher-pupil ratio at that time was 1:32. Lettie de Klerk's ratio was 1:70. Its community, Pienaarsig, has its own share of dysfunctionality and there are children at the school with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. These learning-impaired children were placed in the same class as those with full learning capacity, creating an impossible task for the teachers. As a result of this, the majority of pupils were fundamentally illiterate.

Lessons were sporadic and badly presented by sometimes drunk teachers. Pupils started to drift into the taverns and shebeens as well. The Department's policy is to feed schoolchildren but, for 4 months, there had been no gas for cooking. The children either went hungry or went home at break time. Of the latter, many did not return.

In a community where the rules are enforced by a dominant social minority, parents – the majority of whom are illiterate – were indifferent to the chaotic state of the school. The prevailing attitude was that teachers were responsible for their education and what happened to their children at Lettie de Klerk was none of their concern.

By October 2009, the principal of 25 years had died and was buried before Barbara Vaaltyn arrived as the new Principal.

And, in October 2009, Lettie de Klerk Laerskool in Nieu Bethesda was case study material for a Master's degree thesis on the unconstitutional deprivation and neglect of education, and a savage indictment of the Eastern Cape Education Department.

FINDING FUGARD

In October 2009, on the other side of town, a project was delivering outstanding results. Residents who recognised the need for general economic growth in Nieu Bethesda had earlier in the year conceived the idea of forming the Nieu Bethesda Arts Foundation Association (NBAFA). Registered as a Non Profit Organisation (NPO), their inaugural event was the 'Fugard Festival' – a celebration of the life and works of their hero, playwright Athol Fugard. As intended, all in the town benefited; during the long weekend of music, plays and play excerpts, local hospitality and related industries received a welcome boost in cash flow, with all profit destined for investment in the local, economically disadvantaged community of Pienaarsig.

Part of the Festival's programme was the inclusion of local content in the form of a performance by the 'Sopkombuis Kinderkoor' – a choir for which the majority of performers were recruited from Pienaarsig's Lettie de Klerk Laerskool. In rehearsals, the choir's collective inability to read was all too apparent and, during their liaison with Barbara Vaaltyn, (the newly-installed Principal), the organising committee were shocked to the core as the painful reasons for this illiteracy began to emerge. But Barbara had already begun to initiate changes at the school, despite encountering community resistance which ranged from the passive removal of children from the school to aggressive threats against her life. The Eastern Cape Education Department (ECED) had given her 3 months to "turn the school around", but there was not one cent available to fund this process. NBAFA had found their first social investment programme and the school was officially adopted as a sub-project.



BARBARA'S BATTLES

The story of Barbara's efforts prior to NBAFA's involvement is inspirational:

Within a week of meeting her alcohol-fuelled staff, Barbara had enforced a 'uniform only' rule. Every morning she stood at the school gates, sending those children who arrived in 'civvies' home to change. For this she was much reviled by parents but it was a critical means of starting a new, disciplinary culture and she held firm. Children were no longer allowed to go home to eat – they were required to bring sandwiches to school in the week it took for her to get the gas supply restored and start providing meals again. She'd already generated R 2000 from a fundraising raffle, which funds subsequently formed the basis of a new bank account under NBAFA's financial oversight. Some of the money was used to restore the telephone service and to buy a few pens and basic stationery.

The Department's District Director had been informed of the lack of running water on the property and the condition of the toilets but no discernable action had been taken.

Barbara was short-staffed. She had willing teachers waiting in the wings but they needed to follow Departmental protocols before being officially appointed. NBAFA provided the funds for the an aspirant incumbent to start at the school but in the following months protocols had still not been satisfied, the private funding was not sustainable and the teacher left. Barbara implemented a new attendance recording system for her available, but recalcitrant, staff. And, thanks to a committed team of retired volunteer teachers, the children now had regular lessons.

Although it took a full month to properly instil compliant behaviour in the classroom, this was still an incredible feat in the face of years of undisciplined behaviour.



In the absence of running water on site, she placed outside each classroom donated plastic bowls filled with water. Each child was required to wash his/her hands before entering the classroom after play and toilet breaks.

And, by the time NBAFA had been fully briefed, Barbara had also developed a 5 year plan for the school.

PLANTING THE SEEDS

A section of the large school property was fenced off and a community vegetable garden established. Tended by members of the community and those lost from the formal educational system. (The first crop was recently planted, will be sold to local buyers for markets further afield and the income shared by the workers).

As townspeople became increasingly aware of the school's needs, volunteers stepped in to help. A retired engineer used his own resources to install a direct municipal water supply and the sub standard water from a nearby borehole was redirected to the garden project. Barbara had a supplementary water tank installed on the property.

An independent school garden project was initiated. By May 2010, delineated plots of ground were lying fallow, while other plots in another section were individually allocated to each of the more senior pupils. Now it is their responsibility to tend their respective allotments – planting, weeding, watering and reaping the vegetables for use in the school kitchen. Local experts guide them in effective cultivation practices.



With the accumulation of tangible results, Barbara's local detractors seemed to realise that they should perhaps be taking the same degree of interest in their children's schooling. In a major turnaround and with some financial assistance from ECED, a group of parents addressed the health hazard of the toilets and literally scrubbed the tanks clean.

And, with NBAFA funding for paint and labour, a local builder gave of his time to supervise a project which saw the school building painted for the first time ever. The labour force was augmented by some Dutch visitors, who donated additional funds and who arrived in designer shorts to add their own brush strokes to the children's lives. The project was completed within 2 days and the rooms were ready for the pupils' return to school on 8th January this year. By May 2010, volunteer parents had also painted the classrooms.

FINDING PHILLIDA

A journalist and writer of educational materials, Phillida lives on a farm 18 kms outside of Nieu Bethesda. It takes her 20 minutes to negotiate the corrugated, eroded track into town. She had previously tried to address the literacy problems at the school but, without daily educator input at the school and without the basic resources, it was an impossible task. Now, connected through NBAFA and the garden project and, with a passionate and unyielding new Principal, the time was ripe. She found reading resources in Cape Town and, during the December school holidays, she engaged the pupils in reading lessons at the local library. With perfect synchronicity, a tourist by the name of Dr Kruger walked in and saw her at her task. He wanted to do something for the community and the upshot was a donation of R 3 000 for the purchase of books at the appropriate levels

of literacy and other immediate needs. But he did not stop there. He also wrote a letter to *Die Beeld*, making a powerful statement on the 'reality underneath tourism' conditions in Pienaarsig, which generated a groundswell of donations from different parts of the country. By May 2010, Phillida was glowing with excitement at the real progress being made by a local librarian towards a fully catalogued library of donated books to supplement class reading materials.



Today, she tells of how pupils were placed back at entry-level reading skills and how, as they learned the alphabet, they started to understand how letters made sounds and sounds made words which led to sentences, and how sentences make a story. The wonder of each child's discovery is matched by Phillida's joy. And, in indisputable proof of her effectiveness, the record shows that, after just 6 months, 12 Grade 6 & 7 pupils who could not read at all have bridged a 3 year gap. Phillida continues to offer remedial reading classes.

HOPE COMES WITH A SOCCER BALL

Sport is an integral part of any school. It teaches discipline; respect for rules; co-operation; pride in joint achievement; graciousness in defeat. It helps to develop co-ordination. And, despite the uneven and dusty soccer pitch, in a school without any sports activities at all, the arrival of 10 donated soccer balls was a gift beyond price.

With **money** donated to the school, (lump sums and some very generous monthly commitments), from January 2010, NBAFA purchased:

Books

Landing mat for physical education classes

Volunteer substitute teachers

Paint for the school and related labour

Expenditure is planned for teacher training.

(Audited accounts are available on request)

Other donations and supportive involvement for the same period are:

Correspondence exchange with Grade 6 & 7 pupils at a more privileged school

Office stationery

Fax machine

Tennis balls

Soccer balls

Numeracy teaching aids

Additional remedial training skills in the reading programme

In May 2010, the installation of flushing toilets was in progress, with voluntary supervision by a retired engineer. NBAFA is funding the installation with channelled donor money.

This is an impressive list. But disparate gifts of tangibles and time will not offer these children the platform from which to compete as equals with more privileged peers. At Lettie de Klerk Laerskool, a healthy adult life depends on a structured, phased approach which includes 'catching up' and 'growing up' elements. In Barbara's 5 year plan there is a wish list which feels unattainable for a remote, Karoo primary school.

DREAMS FOR CHILDREN

If children are to dream, to develop goals and strive towards them, they need to know what is possible. These children have never travelled further than Graaff-Reinet. They have never seen the sea. A dolphin is an unimaginable concept. Phillida is offering a trip to Port Elizabeth for the 3 best performers in literacy at the end of this year. Her dream is to offer this experience to all Grade 7 pupils before they start Secondary School.

For the past 7 years, Lettie de Klerk Laerskool has been second on the Department's priority list of schools to be re-built. But the children cannot delay their growth needs while waiting for bureaucracy.

When two of the permanent teachers return from nearly a month's sick leave (taken simultaneously) on 9th June, Barbara will have a full complement of staff and her ratio will be 1:45 (the Department's current norm is 1:36). And the school is growing.

What is most needed is money and in an ideal world, the school would have:

- A paid sports teacher
- Grass seedlings (the children can plant a proper soccer pitch)
- A separate class for FAS and other pupils who cannot learn at the pace of a conventional group
- Funds for pupils who need to be sent to Graaff Reinet for medical evaluation and referral for remedial programmes
- An ABET (Adult Based Education and Training) teacher to help those already lost from the formal educational system to acquire skills – and therefore income earning potential
- Paid part time teachers for 'fantasy' play – music, arts and drama
- Musical instruments e.g. recorders
- Art materials
- Mobile classrooms (to accommodate growth)
- Additional paid teachers to reduce the current teacher-pupil ratio
- A dedicated Principal's office
- A dedicated staff room
- A multi purpose photocopier (scanner, fax, printer & copier)
- TV's, DVD players and educational DVD's (Afrikaans and English)
- The capacity to teach English (the international business language)
- Kitchen equipment (gas based): fridge, stove, pots and pans. Of *immediate* importance is plastic plates and cutlery
- Additional cupboards for the library
- Book cases for 'mini libraries' in each classroom
- Classroom posters (visual aids)
- Additional wall paint
- Drinking fountains
- Wash hand basins
- Regular educational field trips (travel and accommodation)
- School-owned transport



Barbara Vaaltyn knows that dreams cannot be invalidated at the end of primary school. Attainable dreams need to be carried into High School and beyond. There are children at Lettie de Klerk Laerskool who ought to realistically dream of university. But the average daily income in Nieu Bethesda is R 50 - R 60 per day for those lucky enough to have jobs in a seasonal economy. The minimum cost of one return taxi trip to Graaff Reinet is R200. And the nearest High School is in Graaff Reinet.

Bursaries and sponsorships are critical if these primary school children are to take their rightful place in the world.

BARBARA SAYS

..... to all who are involved: "Thank you for bringing change into my children's lives and for exposing them to something beautiful, which more privileged children take for granted. They are starting to feel special – to have a sense of self worth – through your support and care"



L to R: Phillida; Freek Swart (Chairman, School Management Committee); Barbara Vaaltyn (Principal)

POST SCRIPT

Support the 2010 NBAFA Fugard Festival!

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e-mail: info@fugardfestival.co.za

ELVARDO'S STORY

Elvardo is 16. In October 2009, he was a rebellious, bitter, *resentful* child. He was always fighting in the classroom and during school breaks. He lacked basic social skills and his communication consisted mainly of swearwords. If asked to read, he became violently angry. He couldn't write properly.

In January 2010, Elvardo joined Phillida's reading programme. At first, he couldn't read one complete sentence. By the end of the term, he could read a short comedy to his class – from start to finish. Now when he is asked, "How are you?" he replies, "Dit gaan bietjie vir bietjie beter. Ek vorder met my werk"

Six months on, Elvardo has assumed a leadership role. This comes naturally to him. If he sees a pupil struggling with his/her sounds, he instinctively assumes the role of coach. And, although he is still in the process of building on his own basic knowledge, he is helping others to learn to read as well.

Christine Mason – May 2010

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