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A privilege we so often take for granted. In a demanding reading world with perhaps just a fleeting thought to the non-readers, most people concern themselves with the daily struggle of merely keeping their heads above water. Now and then an important reader stands on a podium and quotes statistics that should shock us into action: '13 million South Africans are functionally illiterate in South Africa.' (Did you notice that the statistics quoted remain the same year after year?) Our normal reaction: Ah, add that to the 5,3 million with HIV/AIDS, two million without basic sanitation, four million without jobs...and...and...' However, these statistics are more than just helpless statistics. As with everything else, one has to experience it first hand before it makes sense. One needs to meet one person who looks you in the eye and confesses that he/she only has one wish: 'I dream about reading my Bible at night and sharing the stories with my children.'

How it all started

Annie's dreams became my mission. Annie never had schooling in her life and worked in a library for seventeen years. Mending and cleaning books was her job, reading it was somebody else's privilege. We started lessons one lunch-time behind the library where an embarrassed Annie kept hiding as soon as somebody walked past.

After four years Annie was promoted to library assistant. Bubbling about her new-found skill, she encouraged other people to join the literacy centre at the library. The day I moved to Cape Town the Adult Basic

Education and Training (ABET) learners handed me cash as a farewell gift. 'You have to take this money and start another ABET centre and help people like us.'

Fundraising

Milnerton Library Adult Learner Centre was established in February 2000 with a retired teacher, a librarian, three learners and R270 in cash. We cleared out a store-room, borrowed tables and chairs and used adapted material from the library. In May that year the library staff pitched in to raise funds for our important cause. After knocking on doors (doing what librarians do best), we gathered enough information to present a golf day. Not one of us has ever been on a golf green but we sold tickets like professionals for the 4 ball better ball Stableford competition. It was a huge success. We achieved our aim, to make people aware of our project, raise enough money to start the project (and others) and to acquaint ourselves with community and future partners.

Mediaworks Programme

The Mediaworks Programme was commissioned by Milnerton Library the following year. The programme consists of a software package including CDs for each of the English ABET levels and a full set of master manuals for photocopying purposes.

Mediawork is a computer-based programme, which aims to enhance learner participation and individual tutoring, and is subsequently conducive to computer literacy skills. The programme includes life skills training, consisting of classes in AIDS and health information sessions, home care, preparations for the job market, small business training, et cetera.

From the beginning, we realised that using computers would require a completely new approach. Our volunteers welcomed the programme as it focuses on the adult learner's own progress and development and each person can be assessed accurately according to his level. Any volunteer can now be trained to become a facilitator and preparation work is reduced to a minimum.

Some learners, however, think that it will take them only six months to be fully literate. When they find out (the hard way) that it is not possible, they often lose interest in learning. Their high ideals fly out the window when faced with the hard work and obstacles. Adults can get very despondent if they cannot see their progress immediately. We have therefore devised various ways of rewarding our learners every three to six months to keep their spirits up. Some of the rewards include a library card as soon as they can fill in their own form, an educational outing to museums or other places of interest, a book, a video on the big screen and more. Celebrations, of course, are high on our list of incentives. Our learners love to sing, praise and celebrate their 'coming out towards literacy'. Communicating and sharing with other people who are in the same boat, makes all the hard work worthwhile.

In our first year we held a wedding culture celebration. We all dressed up in our wedding attire, and immediately shared a common problem (a wedding dress that no longer fits). We proudly celebrated our respective wedding days, the joys and sorrows of big feasts and arranged marriages, even the labola and mothers-in-law were discussed in detail.

Evelyn (68) came to our centre that year and as spokesperson and elder of her community, she taught me valuable lessons about her culture and people. She was very proud of her heritage and shared beautiful stories from their oral traditions. The first time she ever touched a computer (with dignified terror), she exclaimed loudly 'Praise the Lord' when it didn't blow up in her face. After that she couldn't get enough of the computer and quickly convinced everybody that 'this is our future'! One of my fondest memories is of Evelyn receiving her level one certificate and in her acceptance speech she told everybody that 'Christelle is

our toolbox, our screw that screws us all together'. Higher praise I have never received.

Finally a centre

What started out as a library project became a centre. Our project expanded and more funds were desperately needed. We knocked on doors again, and received help from the Provincial Library Service, Biblionef, Old Mutual, Rotary (Milnerton) and the community, to name but a few. We held another fundraiser, a big walk/run *Have fun for literacy* (focus on fun!). The most memorable aspect was the community spirit. People walked hand in hand, shouting encouraging words to everybody. The library staff worked together as one. Our learners were quite in awe that so many people were required to run a single project. We have to confess we really underestimated our community. The community in turn underestimated Milnerton Library.

We began to receive media coverage for our project and people started to flock to our centre. Good news? Unfortunately not! We did not have enough space, teachers, material, et cetera, to accommodate so many learners. How do you turn away people who are keen on learning? We had to

change our approach. We established a Friends of Milnerton Library. Friends translated into the volunteers facilitating the classes, the patrons donating to the project and businesses willing to be part of the bigger picture. We received chairs, books, ABET material as well as manpower with the help of Friends. Rotary, in particular, took us under their wing, waved their magic wands and made our dreams come true. Classes have been increased to three morning classes and one evening class, with three facilitators for each class.

Where we're at today

Today we have an average of 25 learners per class and have handed out more than 250 certificates during our four years (some learners received more than one certificate a year).

Quite a few learners found employment as result of the confidence their new-found skills brought about. Patricia even came back to finish level two, selling ice cream to the class (and staff of course). Moses always wanted his own business. At the end of his level three training (small business training), he opened his own shop in the neighbourhood and now visits us regularly with his new car. Katie wrote her life story (we both cried through the first chapter). She also

obtained her driver's license. Everybody's small step to reach his/her dream adds to our success.

Faces became friends and volunteers became real teachers. I started this exercise to change other people's lives. In the end I was the one with the most to learn. Each person that I met through this project (learners and teachers) has become part of my personal growth.

Life skill classes now form part of the curriculum. Fabric painting, childcare, beadwork and word processing are quite popular with the learners. Our main focus for the future is self-sustainability of the project and learners. We are not planning to extend classes to level four as yet, but to focus on job creation and to prepare our learners to take their first steps with confidence into the 'world out there'. Milnerton Library has made a small contribution to the community and is committed to continue to do so.

Our recipe: a dedicated team, inspired volunteers and the knowledge that we are making a difference. We shall endeavour to find new ways to assist and to persevere.

2004

Achievements

Each year the Adult Learners Forum has a Provincial Learners' Award Ceremony during Adult Learners' Week. Milnerton Library achieved the following:

- **Outstanding adult learner** Vuyiso Nxana (2001)
- **Outstanding facilitator** Felicity Waddington (2001)
- **Outstanding educator nominee** Christine Young and Bev Tew (2002)
- **Adult learner of the year** Katie Snyders (2002)
- **Photo competition** First prize (2003)
- **Best centre in Western Cape** Milnerton Library Adult Learner Centre (2004)
- **National Adult Learners' Week 2004** 2nd place in best centre award.