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A chat with one of the founders of the uBambiswano Saturday School Programme: Gill Morris



St Andrew's was very much a frontrunner in setting up an Outreach Foundation. What inspired you and the other founding members to pursue this vision?

An awareness was created to reach out to others and share both our facilities and educational expertise. Mr Frank Simmonds was hugely enthusiastic and a motivating force in this development. In 1989 Mr Simmonds asked Mrs Marilyn Young to research possibilities in this area. Marilyn approached the then Transvaal Education Department for suggested interventions and enrichment initiatives.

At the beginning of 1990, Marilyn Young's husband was transferred to Australia. Marilyn and I had shared this vision of a programme at St Andrew's during the developmental stages, although Marilyn had done all the work. With Marilyn leaving St Andrew's due to their family move, I fell heir to the programme.

It began as a dedicated team including Ms Sandi McCullum, Mr Dave Tredrea, Mrs Meg Grayer, Mrs Janet Axelson, Ms Karen Symons, Mrs Busi Ndlovu.

What challenges were you confronted with and how were they overcome?

There were many challenges but, undoubtedly, funding was always the most daunting.

Communicating with and persuading the Education Department that the initiative was sincere for the benefit took patience and perseverance to gain their trust in our motives and goals. Another huge challenge was to be allowed to provide teacher workshops around teaching methodologies.

As the Foundation grew there were several additions to the core programme. These included Early Childhood and Teacher Development. What were the successes of these interventions?

DEP (Daveyton Education Programme) later renamed uBambiswano slowly enabled us to get to know teachers, HOD's and Heads of primary schools. The teachers then asked us to include them in a programme. This was a huge break through and it led to the development of workshops for teachers, HOD's and management workshops for the Heads of schools. In fact, the multiplier effect of the spend is better assisting teachers. However, we never wavered from our commitment to the children.

The Mobile Library was the brain child of Mrs Meg Grayer. Being a librarian, she saw the importance of this development. Few, if any, Daveyton primary schools had their own libraries. A mobile library serving many schools was far more cost effective than building individual libraries at various schools. This dream was realised through several meaningful partnerships between ourselves, The Benoni Education Initiative and Together Africa & Asia Association. Our common goals were: provide access to books for children; provide opportunities for teachers to receive librarian skills; develop a love of reading; increase reading levels; availability to research material for teachers; develop a culture of responsibility.

Working with disadvantaged communities is a rich learning experience on many levels. Could you share with us a favourite experience which touched your heart?

A lasting highlight and special memory for me will always be the delighted and excited little faces greeting the mobile bus as it arrived to issue books. I fail to comprehend why this initiative has not been duplicated more widely.

Another special memory for me was the delivery of the first Edutainer classroom to Daveyton for an EDC teacher to replace her inadequate, shack classroom. This was made possible by Bright Kid Foundation and Nick Jaffe and other generous sponsors. The containers were converted into beautiful, fully equipped ECD classrooms.

Attending the annual Prize Giving for the Saturday school is always so uplifting to see how the programme has grown to meet the current demands, the levels of confidence of the students and the all-encompassing extension of the life skills included in the curriculum now.

The numerous interventions supporting the Daveyton and Etwatwa communities represent an honourable legacy that we are very proud of. What advice would you give to the current and future custodians of uBambiswano?

I would hesitate to give advice; however, probably staying relevant to educational trends of the time would be a major consideration. An important consideration would also be, not to impose perceived needs but rather consult with others first. Partnerships are valued support structures to encourage. Value quality above quantity and hence develop trust within the community.

This is a programme of quality of which St Andrew's can be enormously proud. It is a successful model, developed, refined and expanded by several leaders over more than 25 years. How enriched was I, to be involved in this community initiative all those years ago.