

PATERNOSTER Rising

The Paternoster Project is changing children's lives faster than they can say 'bokkom'...

by Keri Harvey





Their futures now look brighter than ever before, and hope again prevails in the seaside village. It's all due to a few good men and women, and the support of volunteers and donors who have transformed a great idea into a living reality. And this is only the beginning.

It started with a simple telephone call and a conversation between two long time friends — one with a deep concern for the future of Paternoster's children, the other a German philanthropist. What transpired has been remarkable, inspiring and a positive model of progress for West Coast communities. Jaco van der Westhuizen of Paternoster Fishery, and Christian Neuber, ex-publisher of magazines and books for children turned philanthropist, are these two men of vision.

CHOOSING PATERNOSTER

Christian owned a wine farm in Stellenbosch and had worked on and off in South Africa for 25 years, and when he visited Paternoster he immediately knew it was a special place. "Paternoster is different. Paternoster is magical. Paternoster is unique," he says. "Paternoster is also facing major challenges and we would like to provide encouragement and positive support for residents, while at the same time protecting and preserving the local traditions."

For Christian, good things start with sound education - so he founded the Paternoster Project NPC in 2016. The project is tasked with helping the children of St Augustine's Primary School in the village by teaching them life skills in the afternoons, improving their English language skills, and offering a holiday programme to prepare them for life and the future. In doing this, local heritage is also maintained and promoted.

The project is also involved at the local creche by supporting the local teachers.

From October, volunteers will start giving English lessons in order to prepare these children better for starting primary school. "If you are wondering why a German foundation like ours would choose Paternoster for its international activities," smiles Christian, "the reason is simply because of the people who live in Paternoster."

Local people have shown a sincere willingness to join forces, get things done and improve their personal circumstances. This joint effort gives us great hope that Paternoster could become a role model of success for other villages on the West Coast."

DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS IN ORANGE

"My great love for South Africa, my passion for this magnificent region and the good, loyal friendships with the people of Paternoster make me confident that we can turn Paternoster into a village where well-trained, highly-motivated people work to ensure the future of this little gem on South Africa's West Coast," says Christian.

This is already in full swing. Volunteers from the University of Ravensburg-Weingarten and the Dual Estate University of Baden-Württemberg in Germany have been working in Paternoster since October 2016, and spend three months to a year assisting at the school and crèche. So far, a total of 35 volunteer students have worked in Paternoster. Of these, 70% are education students who are in their final year and 30% are social workers with a focus on early childhood development, family and youth work.



In April 2018, South African education students from the University of Stellenbosch started helping with the morning classes at the school — especially in Afrikaans reading and writing. From October students from the University of Heidelberg will join the programme too. The selection process to find the right volunteer students is lengthy, as only the best-suited students are chosen to volunteer in Paternoster.

These volunteers — easily recognised by their orange jackets — are the hands of the project, assisting with homework and aftercare at the school, as well as a smorgasbord of afternoon activities now on offer to the children.

“The volunteers are the best thing that has happened to the school,” says principal Celestine Barends. She says the pupils’ English has greatly improved since the arrival of the volunteers, as they teach English to grades 2 and 3.

In turn, the volunteers are learning Afrikaans. Christian says the foundation is committed to the project for the long term, and encourages local people to also become more involved through giving of their time, skills, or money to keep the project sustainable.

SKILLS FOR LIFE

Afternoons at St Augustine’s Primary School are jam packed with activities for children to enjoy. All these offerings are fun for the kids and instil life and language skills in a relaxed environment. The German volunteers are of course in attendance to assist wherever needed.



HOOKED ON BOOKS

Thursdays are a hit at St Augustine’s. In the afternoon 60 kids gather at the school to read books and listen to stories – that’s more than a quarter of the entire school devouring books.

"Reading is at the heart of the Paternoster Project NPC, and with the Story Hook initiative we can already see how books are expanding the minds of our town's young readers. The Story Hook children are becoming more confident in reading aloud, are keen to choose interesting books from our growing library and are happy to sit and listen to stories in both English and Afrikaans," says local volunteer Joan Kruger, who was asked by the Paternoster Project NPC to run the reading club.

Yet, the reading club started out humbly in a spruced up shipping container alongside the school. Colourful cushions were made and cupboards installed. Now Story Hook even has its own logo: two children, book in hand, in a fishing boat and ready for their journey of discovery.

Paternoster's children have also had a story book specially written for them and published by the umbrella foundation that administers the Paternoster Project NPC. *Gemeinsam / Together / Saam*, written in German, English and Afrikaans is endlessly popular and formed the start of a small library, which is now populated with classical books, fairy tales, and contemporary stories set in Africa.

Publishers were approached for donations and Story Hook received boxes of beautiful books from Lapa Uitgewers and Exclusive Books. Joan says: "As boxes were opened, each child picked a book and immediately started reading." Friends of the volunteers also started donating books, and founder Christian Neuber asked beloved children's author Janosch to sign copies of his timeless classics, and donated these too.

Books are also being donated by Paternoster residents – a trend started by Ben Rootman, when he recently celebrated his 70th birthday. Ben asked his friends to donate books to the Story Hook in lieu of gifts to him – and the library was enriched with scores of books.





CHECKMATE

The chess club, initiated by Paternoster resident Johan de Jager, kicked off just a year ago and is wildly popular. Kids were coached on opening moves, how to develop the game and finish it off. They have already been competing on the West Coast and doing well in local competitions.

“Chess teaches important life skills,” explains Johan, “such as for every action there is a reaction. We also instil the principle that if kids play a good game of chess and lose, they have still learned a lot about the game and themselves. There is also the awareness that consistently developing oneself is a win in itself.” Stronger players were also asked to mentor weaker players and teach them the required skills, thereby demonstrating the importance of team play. Johan explains that the programme also aims to dispel the fear of losing.





IMPORTANCE OF ART

Local artist Diane Heesom-Green started Stone Fish Studio 15 years ago, and has been teaching children ever since. "We work on projects that are relevant to the children's lives and hopefully make them more conscious of their surroundings," explains Diane. Kids have already completed floor plans of their homes and made models of Paternoster houses in clay, after discussions on architecture and building methods.

"I think what they enjoy most about classes is the formality and integrity of a skill achieved. But clay is also fun and there is a little bit of magic in making something yourself." Diane says the kids are also keen to sell their artworks, usually bringing them back to the gallery after first showing them off at home.

However, if kids don't show up for two consecutive art lessons, another child will fill their place. Diane says this rule teaches kids about commitment and respect for the class. So much so, there is a waiting list for these art sessions.

EQ FOR SUCCESS

It's believed that emotional intelligence is often part of the foundation of successful people. A development programme kicked off last year with the long-term goal of helping children to develop emotionally through self-awareness and understanding one's self in relationship to others.

Paternoster resident Amanda Roon facilitated the programme with German volunteers who suggested the need for such training. "Because we are feeling beings, we need to learn to understand what we feel and how to respond to what we feel," says Amanda. "It means I must be able to label what I feel, be able to take a step back, understand why I feel it, and to then take a deep breath before I decide what to do about it. Even adults will agree that this is a difficult discipline, but luckily it can be learnt."

However, Amanda says the most important objective is "that the children and teachers feel cared for and supported as we endeavour to grow secondary school-ready pupils."

LOVE OF LANGUAGE

Just recently, Paternoster's children started learning to speak German too. Interest was so high that not everyone could be accommodated on the first three-month course, hosted by the German volunteers. Now that the first class has graduated and boasts certificates as proof, the next batch of keen kids is lining up to learn German. While some kids say they want to be able to communicate with German tourists in Paternoster, others say they are learning the language because they want to visit the volunteers back home in Germany. The next group of grades 4 and 5 children will have the chance to take part in the German beginner course starting in the third school term in July.



SEEING CLEARLY

In support of the overall goals of the Paternoster Project NPC, Paternoster Fishery in association with Occuvision launched a programme at St Augustine's Primary School to test the children's eyes.

Learners needing spectacles will be assisted too, in order to focus properly on their schoolwork. However, this project will be ongoing, and eye tests will be conducted annually to ensure optimal eye health for learners. Local home owner Mike Theys and Geo Nel from Occuvision in Vredenburg fully sponsored the programme and did all the eye tests too.



TINY TOT CARE

Twenty years ago, resident Nathalie van der Heever started the Paternoster crèche, to make it possible for parents to go to work, knowing their children are safe and being cared for. Now called Paternoster Educare, the crèche cares for 82 kids from newborn to six years old. Five qualified teachers are employed and each class also has a volunteer helper, plus there's a cook to prepare the children's meals. While the cook works five days a week, he's only paid for two due to a funding shortfall, but still he cooks faithfully for the kids. German volunteers also assist at the crèche daily.



Crèche principal, Rachel Cloete, adds: "The volunteers help us with everything at school. They really help us a lot. They do the beds, help with the meals, sweep the floors, everything. The children really love them and some kids have even started speaking English to them." Last year the crèche was expanded with the addition of a large facility for newborns – a big sunny room, with a bathroom and storeroom.



Built free of charge by long-time resident and builder André Kleynhans, Nathalie says they decided to name the facility 'André se Nessie' in gratitude to him. She says that next on the 'to do' list is a sandpit for the children to play in, as well as a lawn around the crèche.

Nathalie says that from the original day care facility 20 years ago, most of those kids have matriculated, three are fishermen, and many have gone to university and college. Today, some of their kids are now attending Paternoster Educare – and Nathalie is caring for them too.





“The volunteers have done so much and have made such a difference at the crèche and in the lives of the children. In the mornings the children rush to greet them and hug them.”

HOUSE IN THE HEART OF THE VILLAGE

Due for completion in the next few months, Volunteer House opposite the Paternoster Hotel, is a nine-bedroom home-from-home for the German volunteers in the village. It's more than just private living space though, and will house a community coffee shop, boardroom, teacher administration space, have public ablution areas and quiet spaces for reflection.

Local architect Heini van Niekerk designed the building to reflect the historic architecture of the West Coast – thatch along with the Paternoster gables to ensure it blends seamlessly into the surroundings. The house is also being built by resident builders Anker Bouers along with a Paternoster building team, who are taking personal pride in seeing this iconic house rise from the earth in the heart of the village.

ACKNOWLEDGED BY AWARDS

Friday 13th April was an auspicious day for the Paternoster Project NPC. In the annual Community Awards, sponsored by Saldanha Bay Municipality, Arcelor Mittal and Sea Harvest, outstanding community service was celebrated across six categories. Three of the six award categories were won by the Paternoster Project NPC and associates.

The Paternoster Project NPC won the Education category, which recognises “the educator or education institution that changes the life of a child or group of children in a unique and exceptional way”. Paternoster Project NPC founder, Christian Neuber, flew to South Africa to accept the award, along with the German volunteers working at St Augustine's Primary School.



Above: Paternoster Project NPC founder - Christian Neuber

In the category Bridging the Gap between Divided Communities, local builder André Kleynhans won first prize for his ongoing dedication to the community of Paternoster. This category “recognises people or organisations that have made a difference to eliminate discrimination, barriers to equality and encourage the interaction and understanding between communities and various racial groups in an endeavour to attain reconciliation”.



Local architect and designer of the Volunteer House, Heini van Niekerk, won the Youth category which recognises "significant contribution made to improve the well-being of the youth." All winners were nominated and voted for by the local community.



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