

## chapter 5

# tshimologo

At Tshimologo the day begins with prayer.  
"Madim, go with us today, and help us to learn."

We are in a long, narrow room at the Darlimoa School, near  
to the Free State town of Thaba Nchu. Seated along the walls



Feniell Lefalatsa, Zaharia Lebaka, and Oupa Lekgoala  
lead morning prayer at Tshimilogo.

## At Tshimologo the day begins with prayer.

‘Modimo, go with us today; and help us to learn.’

We are in a long, narrow room at the Bartimea School, near to the Free State town of Thaba Nchu. Seated along the table opposite me are fourteen blind men and women of widely differing ages, and next to me is Benjamin, who will interpret. Lessons in braille and independence skills have been put off for the moment so we can talk. Actually, I am here to observe those lessons, but my coming has raised expectations which the centre manager, Ronelle Ceronio, insists must first be met.

I explain about the National Council and where Tshimologo fits into the scheme of things. I say that Tshimologo is an important experiment to bring literacy and independence skills to blind people who have missed their chance, who live away from the cities. I say that they are showing the way and that South Africa needs many Tshimologos.

One by one the members of the group get to their feet to tell a personal story, in English, Afrikaans, or Sesotho. ‘I am sitting in my house. I am doing nothing,’ is how Paul puts it, and everyone else after him. Peter says: ‘I am dying in my life. I come to Tshimologo for education.’ None of them has employment, but all are hoping for work, with the possible

exception of the very elderly. To support her extended family, Alina wants to become a sangoma (traditional healer) and already she is wearing the distinctive headdress.

Questions are raised. 'When will the government grants be increased?' It is hard to live on just R630 a month (\$63) for a whole family.

'How can a blind person vote in secret?' It turns out that many prefer not to vote in elections, distrusting all assistants, even family.

'Why are housing subsidies less for blind people?' I say that persons with physical disabilities have to make their homes accessible, which is expensive. We as blind people cannot demand more, just because we are blind. 'But blind people are targets for criminals in the township,' I am told. 'They need extra security, like burglar bars, and this costs money.' The group is determined to take its protest to the housing department and I say the National Council will support them.

We are interrupted by the arrival of teachers from Mmabana, the local cultural centre. The group divides into two and I join the callisthenics class: 'up, down; left, right,' with the head; 'up, down,' with the shoulders; 'twist, twist,' with the hips and 'kick, kick!' Oupa Ismael is way out of sync, while Oupa Optel (Grandpa Pick Up) valiantly tries to keep up as the rhythm accelerates, but then quits. Ronelle tells me that this is less about exercise than about posture and learning to move around freely.

Next door a music lesson is in progress – trumpets, trombones, and a tuba. Each of the five students takes a turn at playing a scale and then together they struggle up the tone ladder.

Meanwhile, the other class has finished its callisthenics and is busy discussing a play in the making. Gideon will take the part of a blind youth of eighteen who has never been to school. He wants to learn something, but his parents cannot agree what to do. His mother (Alina) says she will look after him here at home. The father (Oupa Ismael) says the boy must go out to work like everybody else. Together they wonder where they have gone wrong, with a child that does nothing.

Other scenes are introduced to make further points. Gideon goes to a concert and also wants to sing, but people are full of excuses – he will struggle to get up on the stage; how will he be able to use the microphone? A nurse is brought into the act and has little to say to blind people, except ‘Come! Come!’ and ‘Go there! Go there!’

At last a teacher from Tshimologo shows up. Gideon is interested, but scared. So the teacher says: ‘You don’t need to join. Just come for a visit.’ And of course the inevitable happens. The message is clear and will surely hit home when the play is performed in front of the community in three months time – Re a kgona! We can!

The full group reassembles for a few final words from me, before lunch, and afterwards the formal lessons of the day in basic English, braille, and mobility. I tell them they are pioneers, but the word is not understood. ‘the one that walks in front; the one that goes first,’ I explain. Benjamin searches for a word and tests it on the group: ‘Re bahlodi,’ he says. ‘Re bahlodi,’ they echo, approvingly.

In a country where skills are in short supply, literacy levels are low, and unemployment rates are extremely high, adult basic education and training (ABET) has to be an urgent priority for government. The ABET policy document of gov-

ernment references a declaration emanating from the UN Conference on Education for All (1990), interpreting basic learning needs as comprising both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to live in dignity and realize their full potential. Because, ideally, all education and training should lead to a nationally recognized certificate, ABET has to be integrated into the general education framework, thereby opening up a path to further education and training (FET). As part of an intended culture of life-long learning, ABET for blind learners goes beyond the community-based rehabilitation model of the past, while retaining its most important elements.

Ronelle translates the technicalities of ABET policy into more practical terms. 'ABET is about functional literacy. It means a person taking control of the circumstances of life around him and contributing to the community. Someone who goes to the post office must know the workings of a post office. Someone who opens a bank account must know about bank accounts. You may be able to read and write, but if you do not understand the systems of society around you, you are not functionally literate.'

When Ronelle came to Bartimea as a young teacher, she was troubled to find a prevocational class of students lazing in the sun. Some of them would actually shy away from her physically as she passed. Later, their teacher began to lock them up in a classroom to prevent them from getting away, abandoning them to their own devices. When Ronelle took over as head of department, she dissolved this miserable group and settled them in the school library, where they could listen to music. 'After all, it was better than what happened before.'

Then she hit on the idea of letting senior students teach them braille during free time. They were joined by Nthabiseng, another young teacher, who volunteered to give further classes. And so, almost coincidentally, they arrived at a point where they were ready to launch South Africa's first ABET centre for blind learners.

The modest funding provided by the Department of Education allowed for the employment of a centre manager and four ABET practitioners for six hours a week initially. The approved curriculum included mother-tongue tuition (Sesotho), basic English, braille, and independence skills, liberally interpreted. Unemployed blind people were taken on as practitioners and special deals negotiated with 'black taxi'



Cyprian Mogane, an ABET practitioner at Tshimologo, teaches blind learners how to read braille.

operators. The word went out to the local communities of Thaba Nchu, Botshabelo, and Bloemfontein township and within no time at all dozens of blind men and women were beating a path to the project venues.

Tshimologo (meaning new beginning) opened its doors in June 2000. A group of volunteers took on the role of management committee and adopted a constitution, conferring NGO status on Tshimologo, while generous international funding from the government of Flanders supported the expansion of teaching hours to four days a week, the acquisition of much needed equipment, and the inclusion of a professional component in training. Flemish funding also enabled the SANCB to enter into agreements with two further provincial governments for the replication of the Tshimologo project in five more communities.

My second day at Tshimologo is spent at Grey College where learners from the Bloemfontein township attend classes. Each blind man and woman tells a story of personal reawakening and I am amazed at the hunger for education. Then I withdraw into the background just to listen to the activities going on around me.

Jacob is one of the first Tshimologo students to enter for the national braille examination and he is busy converting from slate and stylus to Perkins Braille. Laboriously he thumps out his braille, letter by letter. Cyprian is teaching braille contractions: 'Lower c?' He calls for an example 'computer; community,' comes the reply. 'Middle c?' 'Connect.' 'Lower d?' A discussion ensues; in front of a word it stands for dis, in the middle of a word double d. Another contraction and Cyprian rejects the example. With a panicky feeling I realize that, if consulted, I could not quote the rule, long forgotten from my own school days.

Also within earshot, Laban is learning how to make sandwiches. Fay offers him the choice of a knife or shape cutter. He takes the cutter. He spreads some butter and then he has to choose between peanut butter and cucumber. He is surprised how easy it is. The sandwiches will be eaten at a party this afternoon to take leave of Fay, a British occupational therapist departing for home.

A package arrives by messenger. It is a talking watch ordered by Sidwell and he hands over R80 (\$8), a princely sum for someone living on a social grant. I offer to set the time, but Benjamin has to come to my rescue and my only contribution is to give the time from my own watch.

Sanet explains to me about basic English. Each month there is a theme. Presently it is 'all about food' and last month it was 'everything about the family'. Sanet is also responsible for the job shadowing programme in which students are placed with local companies to learn about work. They have to travel to and fro independently and keep to the strict discipline of office hours. Hopefully some of these placements will lead to job opportunities.

My unforgettable visit to Tshimologo draws to a close and I think how as usual this day began, with prayer. 'Modimo, pour your Spirit into our hearts today; and help us to learn.' And it seems to me that on this particular day, as perhaps every day, this prayer has been answered.

A group of people with disabilities tour a new housing development in a South African township



## chapter 6

# houses and

# bombs

Driving south from Johannesburg on the Golden Highway towards the industrial town of Vanderbijlpark, we are

Radio 702. She is taking calls on the dramatic events of last night. Nine bombs exploded in Soweto, destroying vital roads and damaging a mosque. One of these powerful explosive



A group of people with disabilities tour a new housing development in a South African township.

**Driving south from Johannesburg** on the Golden Highway towards the industrial town of Vanderbijlpark, we are listening to talk show host Noeline Maholwene Sangqu on Radio 702. She is taking calls on the dramatic events of last night.

Nine bombs exploded in Soweto, destroying vital rail links and damaging a mosque. One of these powerful explosions catapulted a railway sleeper into a squatter shack half a kilometre away, killing a woman in her bed. Her husband is in hospital fighting for his life.

Noeline's callers are angry ... scared ... sad. It is 30 October 2002; can these things still be happening in South Africa? Who is responsible? Can it be part of the recently uncovered right-wing coup plot?

Leaving Soweto behind on our right, we take a turn-off to the left and, skirting the huge informal settlement area known as Orange Farm, we come to the township of Lakeside. The marquee tent is easily spotted and we waste no time getting inside on this cold and rainy day. Piet Lethole, my driver, and

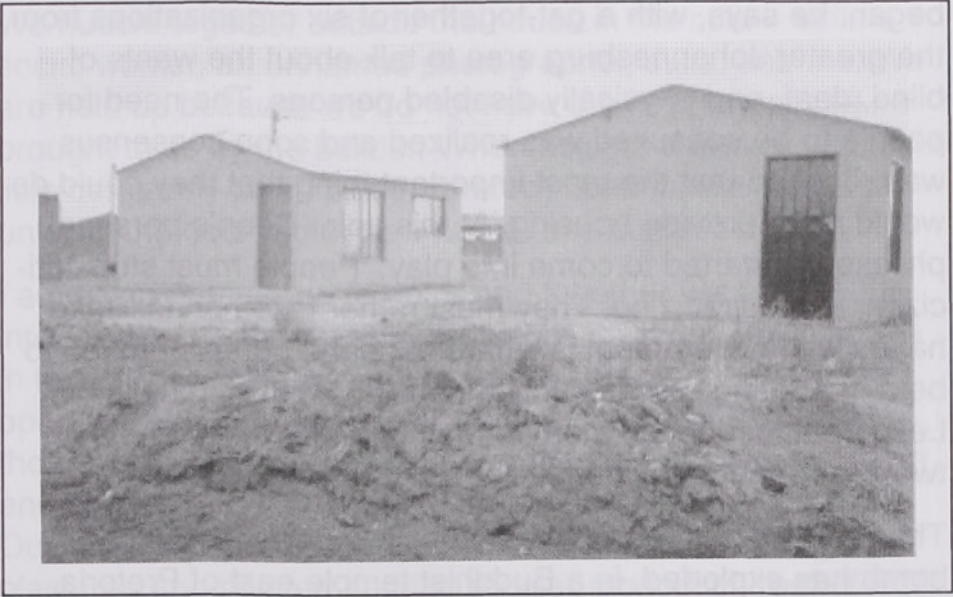
I am the first guest to arrive. As usual on these occasions everybody is late, leaving the organizers plenty of time to arrange chairs, put out crockery, and run a cable across the main road to a nearby house to power the speaker's microphone and a music system that will contribute to the noise of the world.

Lakeside is a community of 8000 households perched, not unexpectedly, on the edge of a little lake. In Lakeside Proper the houses are a touch better than basic, the 'upmarket' houses of the poor, one might say. This is where 100 stands have been set aside for the housing needs of disabled people and the reason we are here today is to hand over the keys to the first six owners.

More guests arrive; a bishop whose name I can't quite catch, some community leaders, the representatives of the participating NGO's, and a blind choir. I am introduced to Pastor Ray McCauley and I shake hands with South Africa's most famous preacher. No media ... every available journalist has been deployed to nearby Soweto where for the world at large more important things are afoot. And so we can begin.

The Rhema Bible Church is at the centre of the Christian charismatic movement in the country and Pastor Ray delivers an inspiring message. He calls this 'a defining moment for our nation'. He reminds us of the parable of the Good Samaritan and how the priest had failed in his duty of compassion. In the struggle years, he says, religious leaders pointed the way and today there was a need to restore the role of the church in social action. St Francis of Assisi once said, 'we must preach the Gospel always, and if necessary use words.'

Mac Leaf, a property developer, is a member of the Rhema Church and he tells us how the preachings of Pastor Ray brought him to an understanding of the social gospel. As



In Lakeside, a township near the informal Gauteng settlement known as Orange Farm, 100 stands were set aside for the housing needs of disabled people. Close on 8 000 households live in the so-called 'upmarket houses of the poor'.

developer he had over the years built more than 4000 houses and made good money, but the time had come to put something back into the community. As part of its outreach programme the Rhema Services Foundation, with Mac Leaf's company, had bought up around 200 flats in the Johannesburg suburbs of Hillbrow, Berea, and Braamfontein, notorious for their drug trafficking and prostitution. These flats had been renovated and given to disabled people, the elderly, and abused women. The housing project in Lakeside would be an even more ambitious venture and would eventually extend to 500 units. One could see the relevance of his company's name, Mingisana, a kiSwahili word meaning 'lots of'.

Deon Rezant steps forward. He is the chairman of the task team. A quietly spoken man, his words are compelling. It all

began, he says, with a get-together of six organizations from the greater Johannesburg area to talk about the wants of blind, deaf, and physically disabled persons. The need for people to be consulted was realized and soon consensus was reached that the most important thing that they could do would be to provide housing. At this point Deon's personal philosophy started to come into play: 'People must stop criticizing and ostracizing. They must rather take hands.' Take hands with government is what he meant, but this proved to be a frustrating process until a housing official, Louella Lekgetha, introduced them to Mac Leaf. It had taken a full two years and today he felt like 'an eagle flying'.

The proceedings are interrupted by the news that another bomb has exploded, in a Buddhist temple east of Pretoria, injuring more people. Pastor Ray intervenes and somehow he finds words of prayer to calm and soothe.

I take my turn and say that Deon's eagle must fly far and high. And then I speak from the heart: 'There are two messages going out from Gauteng today, a message of violence and a message of goodwill, peace, and development. All of us know which one will outlast the other.'

With the talking all done, we break into groups and move off towards the houses. I am with the smallest group and we are headed for the farthest house. This gives me time to chat to Julia Mabasa, who is about to become the new owner of this house. Julia is the mother of three teenagers and, at age 33, she is fast losing her sight to retinitis pigmentosa. She has had just two jobs in her life, one as a cashier in a liquor store and the other as a glass polisher, but I never discover what this entailed. Currently she is unemployed and living on the paltry disability grant of R630 per month.

We huddle together outside the house in the cold – Velli, a social worker, an unnamed photographer, Julia, and me. We are held up because we do not have the keys; these will be brought to us by the builder. When at last he arrives, a simple little ceremony takes place, whereby Julia inserts the key, unlocks the door of her new home, and steps inside.

I am given permission to enter and together we explore the interior. The house is heartbreakingly tiny, 30 square metres in fact. A toilet area is partitioned off, and the rest is all one open space. Once the cane furniture has been introduced, though, a divider will create a cramped but cosy sitting room and an elbow-to-elbow bedroom for Julia and her children. Outside the house is not unattractive, the walls having been plastered and painted and the regular monopitch roof of RDP dwellings replaced by a dual-pitched roof.

State funding for the initial 100 units in Lakeside amounts to R2.6 million (\$260 000). To provide a house like Julia's costs R22 800; R9 000 for the land, R12 950 for building costs, and R800 or so for the drawing of plans, an electricity connection, legal charges, and sundry expenses. The only financial obligation left to the owner is a monthly payment of R150 for municipal services. As Mac Leaf explains, there is little profit for the developer in such an enterprise. Return on investment depends entirely on volume.

For the disabled people settling in Lakeside there is no hope of employment locally. A twenty-minute ride in a township taxi would take them to where mines and factories might offer better prospects for a few. Mac and Deon argue that a local workshop would be a better option and think that the nearby community hall, once renovated, could be put to such use. Time will tell.

A precondition set by government was that the houses be dispersed throughout the township to ensure proper integration into the life of the community. During prior consultations disabled people themselves were insistent that they not be institutionalized in any way, but fit in normally. A series of meetings was held with the residents' association and as a result the newcomers have been warmly welcomed by the locals.

Spurred on by its success in Lakeside, the vision of the task team has expanded massively. As articulated by Deon Rezant, it is nothing less than to build houses for all 'people with special needs' in the country. A section 21 company, not for profit, is to be established to attract further government funding and hopefully to draw in corporate and international donor money. More land has been acquired in Payneville, near Springs, and Mohlakeng, near Randfontein, and Refilwe outside Pretoria will be next in line.

Deon's own story is as unlikely as the project which he leads. One night nine years ago, after a heavy bout of drinking, he settled himself in the back of a Combi to sleep off the effects. When he recovered consciousness, he found himself dumped along the roadside, shot through the head. The assailants have never been identified.

Deon speaks to me factually about his experience, and without undue emotion. Up to this point the story is unremarkable in the violent society in which South Africans live. What is remarkable, though, is the way in which Deon responded to his calamity. First he entered the Coronationville Workshop for the Blind in Johannesburg as a cane worker, but he left soon afterwards to start his own business. Then he went back as a switchboard operator, determined to grasp every opportunity that came his way. Labour relations and peer

counselling proved to be where his talents lay, while he is also given enough time by his employer to organize the burgeoning housing project.

As I listen to Deon, with a tape recorder between us on the boardroom table, my memory winds back twenty years and more to a blind activist of the previous generation, Harry Mohale. Harry was unsilenceable on two issues which he raised unrelentingly in every forum, adult education and housing. At that time black South Africans were subject to a body of apartheid law regulating virtually every aspect of life – where they could live, who they could marry, what jobs they could perform, what amenities they could enjoy, and much besides. The provisions of the Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act (Act 25 of 1945) are pertinent here.

According to this act no 'Black' could remain in a prescribed area, outside the so-called 'homelands', for more than seventy-two hours, unless 'he' had resided there continuously since birth. On the strength of a birth certificate therefore you would become 'a 10 (1) (a)', the person being labelled according to the section of the Act that applied to his circumstances. So strict was the law that a man could go away for Christmas and on returning find himself back on the seventy-two-hour restriction.

You could also remain in such an area if you were 'a 10 (1) (b)', meaning that you had worked continuously in such an area for a period of not less than ten years. Not only would you have to produce proof of your employment, but you would have to know the answers to some tricky questions as well. One of the favourites asked of Sowetans commuting by train to Johannesburg was this: 'At what point do you come to Uncle Charlie's?' In truth Uncle Charlie's was a roadhouse not near the railway line at all.



And then there were '10 (1) (c)'s', the wives, unmarried daughters, or sons under the age of eighteen years of 'Blacks' mentioned under the previous paragraphs of the Act, and '10 (1) (d)'s', comprising those 'Blacks' granted permission to remain in the area by an officer appointed to manage a labour bureau – and I give the exact reference - in terms of the provisions of paragraph (a) of sub-section (6) of section twenty-one ter of the Black Labour Regulation Act (Act 15 of 1911).

But being allowed to remain in an area did not translate into the right to own property there. Houses – where houses were available – were given to heads of families on 99-year lease, a measure converting uncertainty of tenure into a permanent condition. Most disabled individuals were unemployed and had to subsist on disability grants. A means test was applied which included the income of the spouse and therefore disabled persons tended not to get married but simply to cohabit. When, occasionally, someone did have sufficient income and actually was the head of a family, he would still meet with bureaucratic barriers just because of his disability.

These, then, were some of the harsh realities that angered the founding generation of disability activists in South Africa – Harry Mohale, Ruth Machobane, Friday Mavuso, Thulani Tshabalala, and many others. But it is Harry that I call to mind as I sit at the boardroom table with Deon, talking about new and exciting times; Harry, because it was right here at this table that he delivered his final appeal for action, at a committee meeting of the SANCB. Whether that plea was for housing or for adult education – Harry's other cause - I cannot remember, nor can I look it up in the record, as the minutes of that meeting were never written, because of Harry's fatal heart attack which terminated the proceedings.

The housing needs of people with disabilities were, of course, only a sub-set of the limitless demands being made of the ANC-led government as it came to power in 1994. Housing was also an election promise: 'One million houses within five years.' It was a promise much ridiculed at the time, for example, in a cartoon showing a gaping hole in a Johannesburg highway, caused by a house miraculously fallen from heaven.

A Department of Housing White Paper, adopted in late 1994, transformed this promise into public policy. The declared goal of the Government of National Unity was to increase housing's share in the total state budget to five percent and to increase housing delivery on a sustainable basis to a peak level of 338 000 units per annum, within a five year period, to reach the target of one million houses in five years.

The sceptics, it would seem, have been put to shame. The total number of houses built from 1 April 1994 to 31 March 2000 was 997 552. By September 2002 the houses completed or under construction had risen to 1 444 932. By the time of the 2004 general election the figure given out was three and a half million. While complaints about 'matchbox houses' – in reference to size and design – are likely to continue, the housing of hundreds, and potentially thousands, of disabled persons and their families is a tangible achievement of democratic government.

And I would argue that the new kind of activism, advocated by Deon Rezant and his 'brothers and sisters' in faith, has much to do with it. It is an activism that is persistent, insistent, and hopeful. It is an activism that says: 'Let's take hands and get things done.'

## chapter 7

# hello world



Tumi Matsheka, GM Human Resources at the South African Revenue Services (SARS), Pravin Gordhan, SARS Director General, Trevor Manuel, Minister of Finance, Dr William Rowland, SANCB National Executive Director, and SANCB Chairperson, Judge Zak Yacoob of the Constitutional Court, at the launch of the SANCB's Optical Centre, which trains blind and partially sighted young people as call centre agents.

## **I commit myself to be positive** towards my training

To work hard with the trainers and learners

To believe in myself

The above is a pledge of commitment made by Sonet, a student at Optima College in Pretoria. The first module of Sonet's course is called Taking Charge and the words of the pledge are of her own composition. Each student on the course will write a similar pledge and the self-imposed obligations will be contractual, in an ethical sense.

But why the pledge?

Because Sonet is a pioneer in a new field of training for blind people in South Africa. In the first year only 30 learnerships will be available and for each student that takes up a learnership many others will be turned away.

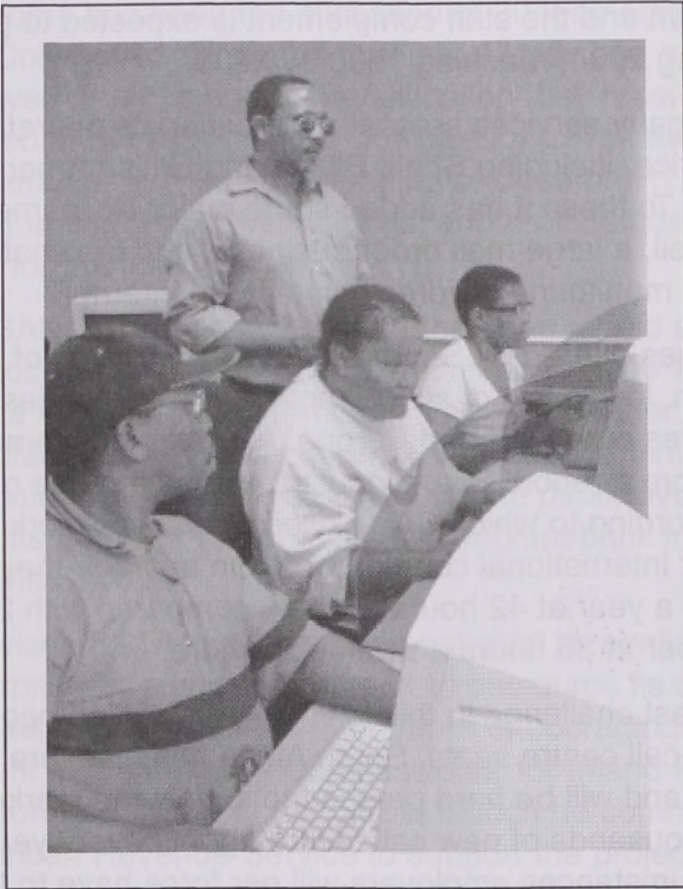
During the first six months of training Sonet will learn to operate the equipment required in her new occupation, in a simulated environment. She will also develop the necessary 'soft skills' to cope with stressful situations in which customers

demand speed and efficiency, and are often impatient and rude. This will be followed by six months during which Sonet will be dealing with real people in live situations, but still within the controlled environment of the College. After that she will go out into the commercial world as a qualified call centre agent.

For two generations the preferred occupation for people like Sonet has been switchboard operating. Thousands of blind South Africans have earned their living this way, and continue to do so, on the gold mines, in government offices, at banks, and in all kinds of commercial settings. As a result of the Soweto uprising in 1976 – when many government buildings were burned down – lots of black switchboard operators lost their jobs, but in the main telephony has offered secure and often life-long employment. However, the replacement of auditory cues with light signals, direct dialling that bypasses the switchboard, and the allocation of extra duties to operators created a growing feeling of unease about the future. Would increasing automation, for example, not put blind telephonists out of work?

Then came the ultimate threat: the call centre. Less jobs concentrated in fewer places ... A highly visual environment with computer screens, data grids, graphics, and such like ... The demise of the old-style telephonist? True. The end of such work opportunities? Untrue! What turns out to be a growth industry could, in fact, offer more jobs than ever before, because of those very computers, and the adaptability of blind people.

There is a growing demand for customer contact solutions in such fields as financial services, travel, home shopping, healthcare, cellular telephony, and public information. Because of this, the call centre industry worldwide is predicted



Musa Machinini, a Call Centre lecturer, became the first blind person in South Africa to be accredited as a Contact Centre Assessor in 2003.

to generate an income of \$59 billion in 2003 alone. South Africa's share – estimated at R532 million – is admittedly a modest one; but this is set to soar once the full potential is realized and more foreign companies establish call centres offshore.

The R20 million invested by a British company Dialogue UK in a local call centre is the first tangible sign of South Africa edging ahead of countries like India in the race to build a viable call centre industry. Dialogue employs 110 people in

Cape Town and the staff complement is expected to grow to 600 during 2004, reaching 1500 by 2005.

The company services several multi-nationals operating in South Africa, including Shell, Pfizer, and British American Tobacco. To these it has added some major UK names such as Truebell, a large mail order business, and Lexchatsafe, a company monitoring children's use of the internet.

Advantages offered by South Africa are high rates of fluency in English, low levels of staff turnover, and similarities with the cultures of the UK and Europe. A further inducement comes from a report on the industry across a range of countries, according to which SA's skilled operatives work harder than their international counterparts. On average they work 243 days a year at 42 hours a week, compared with 220 days a year at 36 hours a week elsewhere.

The biggest challenge in this is finding the skilled people to fill all the call centre seats. South Africa has a severe skills shortage and will be hard pressed to supply the market with tens of thousands of new call centre agents every year. In such circumstances employers will per force have to turn to sources of labour overlooked in the past and this is where the South African National Council for the Blind has seized on an opportunity.

Skills development in the country is in the hands of 25 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) that are required to fund learnerships in all the major areas of the economy, from agriculture to technology, from manufacture to retail, and according to legislation 4 percent of these learnerships have to be awarded to people with disabilities. It is an obligation they are struggling to fulfil, which perhaps explains the enthusiasm with which the Services SETA responded to the SANCB's perfect fit proposal.

The outcome has been the allocation of 30 learnerships to Optima College for call centre training. All trainees must be unemployed persons and the qualification they receive will be certificated under the National Qualifications Framework. And the learnerships are linked to funding of close on R1.5 million to pay for equipment, meet salaries, and provide cost of living stipends for the learners.

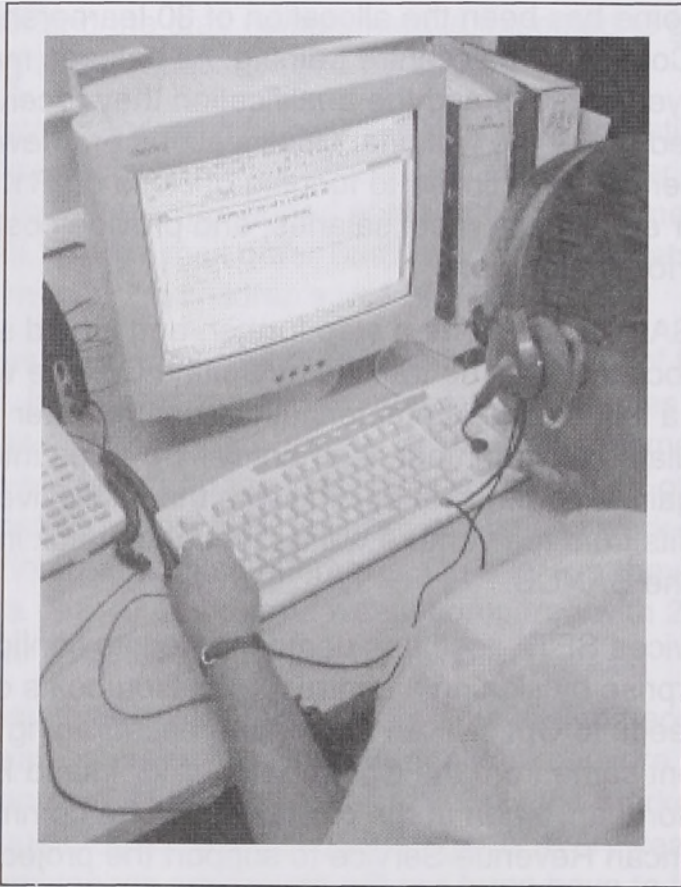
But the SANCB has gone a step further, and a bold step at that: associated with the training at Optima College will be Opticall, a fully-fledged commercial call centre. After training in a simulated environment, learners will be given internships here to gain experience in dealing with the public live and on line. Profits from the venture will be ploughed back into the work of the SANCB.

The Services SETA itself has demonstrated its confidence in the enterprise by signing a contract to outsource its own call centre needs to Opticall. An even more encouraging endorsement came from the Commissioner for Inland Revenue, Pravin Gordhan, when at the official launch he committed the South African Revenue Service to support the project in the form of scholarships and job placements.

Of course, no commercial undertaking can be safeguarded against risk. Is it then the role of an NGO, or DPO, to take financial and reputational risk by setting up a greenfields operation in an area of which it has no direct experience?

The justification lies in potential job creation for blind people and the generation of a new income stream. Even so, the SANCB is minimizing risk by taking on business partners with a proven track record. Profits will be shared with Syntell, the company that will be responsible for the technology and business generation, while Outlearning is contracted to supply specialized training materials and co-manage the





Specially adapted equipment allows blind and partially sighted people to access information for clients who contact Optical.

learnerships. Ownership of the project, though, vests in the SANCB alone.

Another question: in moving from switchboards to call centres, are we not repeating stereotypical employment solutions?

In defence of switchboards, let it be said that their operation has put bread on the table for countless blind people, and earned them a place of respect in the community. However,

the first job placements in call centres illustrate the variety of services that can be handled by blind agents, without the public even being aware of the use of adaptive technology. Examples are complaints at the national broadcaster, trouble-shooting at a technology company, and legal advice at the Automobile Association. The latter placement of Zaheerda Saloojee, a bright young partially sighted lawyer, did raise an alarm.

Three weeks into the job Zaheerda's ZoomText software remained incompatible with that of the call centre and the employer was ready to throw in the towel. At this point a dispute broke out between Disability, the placement agency, and NC Technologies, the supplier of the software. Caught in the middle, Zaheerda knew that she was on the verge of losing her hard-found job.

It was Johan Grové, a computer lecturer at Optima College, who identified the likely source of the problem: a lack of short-cut commands in the call centre programme to enable Zaheerda to bring discreet information to her screen.

An effective technical support service has clearly got to be part of the strategy.

I turn again to the pledges prepared by the Optima students and see that some have actually written an action plan for life, running to two or three pages. One of them wants to find employment, to buy a house, to raise a family. Another intends to be a manager out there somewhere, within five years. A third wishes to go to America. For all of them the call centre is a stepping stone.

The dreams of these young people somehow touch me deeply. May they all come true, not in America, but right here in a proudly South African way.

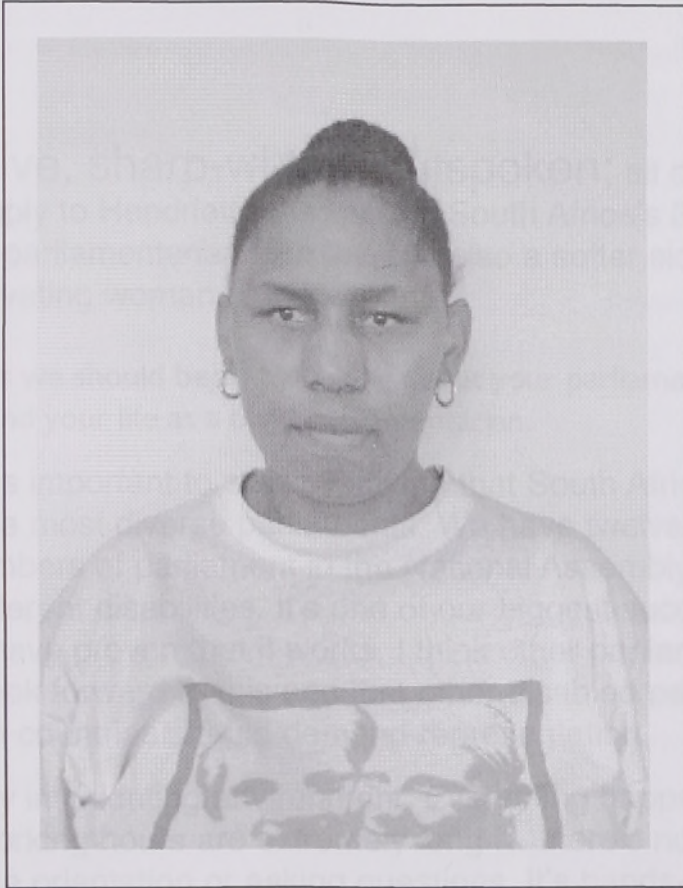
Professor L. Grové, University of Pretoria, is the author of the book 'The Disabled Women's Development Project' published by the University of Pretoria Press. She launched her career as co-ordinator of Disabled People South Africa's Disabled Women's Development Project.

## chapter 8

# the girl who

# asked why

Interview with Hendrietta Bogopane



Hendrietta Bogopane, partially sighted disability activist and parliamentarian. Hendrietta chairs the Joint Monitoring Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Children, Youth and Disabled People in the South African Parliament. She also represents disability on the SA National AIDS Council. She launched her career as co-ordinator of Disabled People South Africa's 'Disabled Women's Development Programme'.

**Assertive, sharp-witted, outspoken;** all of these words apply to Hendrietta Bogopane, South Africa's 30-year old blind parliamentarian. But there is also a softer side to this captivating woman of many parts.

Perhaps we should begin by talking about your parliamentary work and your life as a blind parliamentarian.

I think it is important to start by saying that South Africa has one of the most diverse parliaments. We have twelve disabled members of parliament in the National Assembly, with many different disabilities. It's one of our biggest successes and we have proven that it works. I think other parliaments should look forward to this and that other disabled people in their own countries should demand representation.

It's a very intimidating environment. Everything happens fast ... the working hours are extremely long ... there's no time for things like orientation or asking questions. It's hands-on and learning on the job.

You don't know from what side you're gonna wake up from tomorrow because in politics ten minutes is a long time. For a

blind person it is very, very challenging. There are volumes and volumes of material and if you use braille at no stage are you gonna be able to catch up. You've got your order paper, questions for the President (and Deputy President), minutes, reports, legislation before parliament; nothing is read out. You get these papers every morning and you must read them so that you can begin to know what will be happening, and where you must go.

| How do you cope?

I have a very experienced office manager, Ntsiki, who is also my personal assistant. She has learned how to serve a blind person. She will read things before I come and circle the ones that are relevant to me, that she thinks I need to know. She does this for me in terms of the order paper, and in terms of the questions she will scan them, or tap into the parliamentary website and print out a large print copy. I have managed to train my PA and she has become so parliamentary sensitive that she knows what is happening, when and how, and so she's become a very strong support.

| Do you follow any routine, and are there any things that you do to sort yourself out for the day?

You have to come in early – so that's what I do. Parliament begins functioning at nine, but I'm usually there by seven every morning. I have to get time to go through my e-mails, before everybody arrives, before the phones start ringing. And then at eight my PA comes in, and that's the time she will go through the written things I can't read, that she can't scan, that's handwritten. Then we go through the correspondence and plan our day. There's an organised parliamentary programme that's standard for Monday to Friday. Monday is party day, Tuesday this, Wednesday that ...but I would say

it's a very, very interesting environment, and very exciting to be in politics and a disabled person.

| You chair one of the parliamentary committees, don't you?

Yes, I chair one of the most difficult parliamentary committees, established during the second democratic parliament – and I am very excited to be the first chair. It has one of the longest names in the history of parliament, but it is called the Joint Monitoring Committee on the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Children, Youth and Disabled People. The word 'joint' means it is a committee constituted by both houses of parliament, with seventeen members from the National Assembly and nine from the National Council of Provinces – one from each province – and me, that's twenty-seven members altogether.

| What are the powers of this committee?

To be very brief, it's monitoring, it's oversight. Besides the standard functions of an ordinary portfolio committee in the National Assembly or select committee in the National Council of Provinces of considering legislation, considering departmental reports, deliberating on budgets, and calling for public hearings on specific legislation or budget votes, this committee has additional powers. For instance, we have to ensure that each and every budget vote passing through parliament is child, youth, and disabled friendly. But also that legislation before any other committee of parliament is disabled, youth, and child friendly.

We have provincial powers as well. There is a direct link to the provincial legislatures so we can know what they are doing. Not only that: we actually have to ensure that legislation is going to be successfully implemented by departments in terms of what programmes they put into place. And we

look at whether those programmes are intended to improve the quality of life in the sectors we represent. Over and above this, we monitor everybody that gets government funding and operates in the field of disability. We are in the process of developing guidelines on how to work with NGOs – who gets money from government, and how to monitor the use of the money.

Over and above that, we have the responsibility of ensuring that South Africa ratifies the international instruments relating to the sectors we deal with – your treaties, charters, conventions, and protocols. And not only that, we also have the responsibility of ensuring that South Africa meets its obligations with regard to particular instruments. It's a huge committee with a very, very big mandate and we have achieved quite a lot, I would say, for a three-year old committee.

Congratulations! That is certainly an achievement, also for the disability rights movement in South Africa. But now I want to go back to the early part of your career, which I think started with Disabled People South Africa (DPSA).

Ja, I would start it right as a young person, and link it. I spent my school years in a special school, first at Bartimea School for the Blind and Deaf in the Free State and then at Filadelfia Secondary School, outside Pretoria. I completed as a private candidate with an adult centre.

My life history ... I've always had this dream – because I've gone through life with lots of problems, lots of challenges; and as I was growing up I wanted to find out why? I've always been a young, assertive, disabled girl who had questions, that wanted answers. Why should I be in a special school? That is where it all started, from the why's and the why not's.

When I left Filadelfia I started interacting with other organizations. NOBSA (National Organisation of the Blind in South Africa) was one of the first I came across, under the leadership of Ruth Machobane, when I had problems. Then I met DPSA and I started understanding how I can make my own dreams come true, of changing South Africa for a better place. Then I became the mother of a visually impaired child, Kealeboga, and I said I cannot have my daughter growing up like I did. The only way is to begin finding solutions to all my why questions, to be part of the solution. So when I was doing public relations at Pretoria Technikon, when I was in my third year, I applied for this post to be the National Coordinator of the Disabled Women's Development Programme.

And did you complete your diploma?

I have a national diploma, a B-Tech and an Honours degree, specialising in media relations, public relations, and communications.

The Disabled Women's Development Programme - tell us about that.

I had to start the programme from nothing. I had to mobilize women and fit disabled women's issues into the political agenda, with the establishment of the Gender Commission. I was fresh from school and it was my first job, and I had to learn on the job. I grew a lot out of that and that ended up leading me into politics and into parliament, where I am now, because I had to debate disabled women's issues with the ANC Women's League and with the IFP Women's Brigade. Parliament was dealing with a lot of legislation and I had to develop position papers, do research, and monitor. I had to interpret the economy to women and I had to understand what the global village means to disabled women.



It awarded me the opportunity to be everywhere. It gave me a chance to develop my listening skills, because I had to sit down and listen to women with different disabilities – quadriplegics, physical disability, deaf, blind. I spent time with them, asking them questions, so that I could represent them well. And that laid a very strong foundation for me in politics.

And then I established what we call the Escom Disabled Women Achiever Awards. Which is very successful, I must say, which is still doing well. It has really become a carrot for disabled women. Every year they look forward to being on stage, receiving the prizes, being on television. It opens a whole lot of doors for the winners.

| You are also an Aids activist. Could you speak to us about that passion of yours?

As I indicated ... I've been a young girl who always had lots of questions. So amongst the questions I had was the issue of HIV/AIDS. When HIV/AIDS started becoming a problem in South Africa and women gathered to talk about HIV/AIDS, then I asked: Are disabled women represented? I went through the documentation and I analysed the messages and strategies, and I started saying, this does not accommodate disabled women! Then in 1997, when preparations were being made to launch the Partnership Against HIV/AIDS under the then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, I took the initiative to influence the partnership to ensure that disabled people would be included; and that led to me becoming the first disability sector representative in the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC).

Disabled people, women and men, are more vulnerable because of their disability. They're likely not to get the information, they're likely not to access the workshops. 'Cause we do

have a disability culture – if I may use the word – the messages are totally irrelevant, the messages are not disabled friendly. But also in terms of South Africa being in Africa: in the African continent women are not in control of what happens in the bedroom. That's in African culture, where women have no say in relation to sex and sexuality – and that then impacts on their disability. They are women and they don't have power, but they are also disabled. There is no self-esteem and it makes it totally impossible that they are going to negotiate the use of a condom.

Some people seem to think that to have sex with a disabled woman can cure their AIDS. Is there really such a belief?

Yes, there is. It's the rumour that having sex with a virgin cures your HIV; and because disabled women are regarded as asexual, then, automatically, they are virgins – because nobody is expected to be having sex with them. Yes, the rumour is very strong and it puts disabled women at much higher risk.

Amongst all your activities you also find time to run a business.

Yes, I am a junior partner in a public relations, events management, and community development company, Makwetla and Associates. We opted not to change the name because it was one of the first black companies in South Africa, founded by Angie Makwetla in 1992, and I came in as a partner in 1999. Angie believes I will add value as a younger woman, with the dynamics of change in public relations and events management. We have now added the components of research and community development – these are our four main streams. And we've brought in very strongly the issue of disability, to make all our programmes, all our projects, disabled friendly. It's part of our standard contract.

Have you been able to penetrate the private sector?

Yeah, our clients are mainly private sector. We're handling amongst our accounts the Sowetan Newspaper, through its Nation Building Programme – there are eighteen nation building projects. Eskom is one of our biggest clients, and we are dealing with Transnet, Telkom, and Anglo American.

We offer a full package. We are dealing with their image as companies and we are handling their social responsibility. We communicate what they offer ... we go out and look for projects for them ... we run workshops ... we do research. If Transnet has 8 or 10 million Rand for social spending, they channel it through the Makwetla account and we agree with them what projects they are going to sponsor. We will disburse the monies and monitor whether those projects are doing what they are supposed to be doing. We do a needs assessment; if they need capacity, we will organize that capacity.

We also do a lot of awards. The biggest one that everybody associates with us is the Community Builder of the Year. We've celebrated our thirteenth anniversary running that one. Then there's the Young Communicator and there's the Eskom Disabled Women Achiever Awards. And now we will be doing TWIB – Technology for Women in Business, which is our first project with a government department (Minerals and Energy).

And what about Hendrietta the person, the woman? What do you do in your own time, when you are not rushing around in parliament or elsewhere?

I love reading, and I read everything I can lay my hands on – braille, tape, and print. When I am driving, then I listen to tapes. I read braille mostly in bed when I just want to switch

the light off before I go to sleep. I use my spectacles for print, and the books I fall in love with I send to be enlarged, so I can read them over and over again. My star being a fish, I am a spiritual person; I love reading motivational books which keep me going. My favourite author is Iyanla Vanzant – a woman, US-based.

And will there be a life after parliament?

Definitely! I am an ambitious young girl. Anybody who follows horoscopes knows that a Pisces loves dreaming, fantacizing about all sorts of things. I dreamed of a beautiful house, and I've managed to achieve that. I drive my dream car, a Landrover 4x4.

I have two beautiful girls. And I always wanted to get married one day, which I know may seem strange, but marriage is part of my plans. I will be getting married on the 2nd of November. We have gone through our traditional wedding already, 'cause he's paid the lobola. We'll have the western part in November.

So it's a very exciting life.



The photograph shows the deaf Member of Parliament, Winnie Newman-Druhan (extreme right), taking the oath of office. An election alliance between Disabled People South Africa and the African National Congress resulted in five DPSA nominees entering Parliament in 1994. It has become ANC practice to ensure the direct representation of people with disabilities in other significant public structures also, such as the Constitutional Court, the Commission established for Human Rights, Gender and Youth, the National Development and Labour Council, the National Skills Authority, and the boards of several Public Enterprises.

## chapter 9

# the power of

# signing 'no'!

Interview with Wilma Newhoudt-Druchen, with  
Ronel Davids as Sign Language interpreter



The photograph shows the deaf Member of Parliament, Wilma Newoudt-Druchen (extreme right), taking the oath of office. An election alliance between Disabled People South Africa and the African National Congress resulted in five DPSA nominees entering Parliament in 1999. It has become ANC practice to ensure the direct representation of people with disabilities in other significant public structures also, such as the Constitutional Court, the Commissions established for Human Rights, Gender and Youth, the National Development and Labour Council, the National Skills Authority, school des and the Boards of several Public Enterprises.

**The passion expressible** in Sign Language had never occurred to me before. But it did now, most forcibly, as Wilma Newhoudt-Druchen, South Africa's 38-year-old deaf parliamentarian, told me her life story and spoke about the issues that keep her fired up.

People see you in parliament using Sign Language and you are a well-known public figure; but I want to start somewhere else. Could you begin by sharing with us something of your early life and time at school?

I grew up in a part of Cape Town called Retreat. I became deaf at the age of three, through meningitis. My parents didn't know something called meningitis. They always told me I had brain fever; only later did I find out. In the 1960's meningitis became an epidemic and I am deaf because of that sickness.

I then entered a deaf school, the Dominican School for the Deaf in Wittebome. The education that we received was very, very poor. That time, we didn't know any better; only when I became older I then realized that the education in the deaf school doesn't really take you very far. But I was an above-

average student. It was a Catholic school, run by nuns. They had their own ideas about deaf education, but my teachers were not nuns. They felt that I should try and go to a hearing school.

We had three schools in the area. We had the deaf school; then opposite we had a primary hearing school called St Augustin's. Just next to that we had a high school for girls only, Immaculata. The teachers felt that I should try the school opposite. I was in standard six; but the deaf school didn't offer Afrikaans, so I went back to standard five at the primary school.

At the beginning I was socially isolated. I spoke like a deaf child and many of my peers couldn't understand what I was saying. But academically I was doing very, very well and that helped me to gain more confidence. What helped me a lot was the fact that the deaf school was just over the road. So, before I went to St Augustin's in the morning I would go and socialize with the deaf children, and after school the same. I passed standard five and I was then accepted at Immaculata High.

I suppose that was a relatively supportive environment. What happened, though, when you left school?

When I completed my matric, that time I had a friend who went to Gallaudet University in America. He was deaf and we corresponded with each other. I wanted to go and study there, but no funds were available. My father then said: 'Why not try University of Cape Town?' I wanted to become a doctor ... you know, very naïve, thinking they would accept me? At the time science was not really taught at a girls' school – and so I entered for a BSc degree, not for medicine, doing first year physics and chemistry over two years in the academic support programme.

I struggled a lot! There was no interpreter, there were no note-takers. But a Lions Club donated a FM system with attachments to my hearing-aid. Unfortunately, it was the old type of microphone with a long cord; so the lecturer would walk up and down, up and down, and the cord would knock, knock, knock, and the sound would be cut off. I then myself decided, after two years, I can't any more. I then left UCT and worked for a while. And I thought, well, let me try University of South Africa, Social Work by correspondence.

When I was doing my second year at UNISA, I was accepted by Gallaudet. That deaf friend of mine in America, Lindsay Dunne, he paid for my flight. At the same time I tried to look for finance from USAid. Normally, when you apply, you'll get an interview, and if you're successful, they then decide where you must go. But I told them: 'Whether you give me the scholarship or not, I'm going to Gallaudet.' But I was lucky, when I arrived over there, the University paid. USAid then informed me for my second year they will fund me fully, completely. And so I studied social work at Gallaudet.

For my practicals I worked at an organization called Deaf Pride. In later years I became a board member. In my final year I worked at a maternal and child health clinic. They'd always have interpreters available for deaf people.

Just before I graduated, I was nominated for the graduation speaker. That means the provost will interview all those who are nominated; but the social work department who nominated me refused to tell me, because they knew I would automatically turn them down – I never liked that kind of publicity. So maybe that was my start in public life, because I spoke in front of 5000 people. And it was international, Gallaudet students come from many different countries. Up to today, they tell me that was the best speech ever to be given at the university.



It was surely time to come back home. Did you return immediately?

I knew that, if I come back home, I am never going back to America, not even to study. So I thought: 'No, let me stay for my MA degree.' Because I was a graduate of Gallaudet my tuition fees were waived. And I was lucky, the United Nations then funded my living expenses.

But I didn't complete my MA thesis. The course work, though, helps me a lot here in South Africa. It helps me with clarity as to how I can do my presentations and how to explain things about deafness. They've asked me to finish my thesis, so they can give me my degree, and not to use my old thesis, but my speeches here in parliament. So I'm busy compiling my speeches as part of my thesis.

When at last, after six years, you did return to South Africa, it had become a very different place. What were your impressions?

I arrived back in 1994, and I must say there were a lot of things I had to catch up with. For example, I never saw the beginning of the INDS (Integrated National Disability Strategy). I feel I missed out on that. Also, there was a lot of talk about inclusive education, and somehow I missed out on that too. And the background of how Sign Language came into the constitution, I can't find anything written that actually says how this all started. And then I came to parliament in 1999 and my first exposure to other disabilities was just before that – I wish I had that exposure much earlier on.

And what about employment?

In late 1994 DPSA offered me a job, but at that time I didn't think of different disabilities. I felt that my training was to work

with the deaf. Deaf people never had the experience of sitting comfortably down with a deaf social worker, where they could express themselves in Sign Language, in their own way. It was my time to give back to the deaf and I wanted to work full-time with the deaf first.

Before I left for America, I was one of the founders of the Deaf Community of Cape Town, a local organization. Just before I came back they applied for a welfare subsidy, hoping I would come and work for them. And so I worked for the Deaf Community of Cape Town as an ordinary social worker. I must admit, I enjoyed it very, very much, but it became too much for me later. The deaf people were streaming in to see me. Yes, I enjoyed the work – meeting deaf clients, meeting their families, going to their workplaces, sharing experiences, that was good.

Then when the job of Provincial Director came up at DEAFSA, I was fortunate enough to get appointed. It meant working with departmental heads and staff and it gave me more exposure to the different disabilities out there. At that time the Nippon Foundation gave money to Gallaudet to work in two countries, one of them South Africa. I was advisor to the project co-ordinator researching what deaf people really needed to do with the money. The conclusion was leadership training and it then became the WDL (World Deaf Leadership) programme. Both Bruno, who is now my husband, and I became involved as advisors and trainers. The money left over from that project we used to have a youth camp for pupils from 25 schools, and that was the start of our youth camp training.

I was DEAFSA Provincial Director for one year and then DPSA nominated me for this position in parliament.

Entering into parliament must have meant a huge change for you. Was the transition very difficult?

I must let you know ... I never expected to be here, not at all. It wasn't part of my dreams, and it wasn't easy. You then realize you have to fight for yourself. You would have thought coming into parliament, things would be ready for you, but they were not.

There was no interpreter provided for me; and you cannot work here without an interpreter, you cannot – it's just impossible. I didn't even think of using the other disabled members to help me – you're on your own. So I found out who that person is responsible for staff and I had to explain to him all my needs. It took a long time. They would say: 'Oh, you need an interpreter. Who's going to be the interpreter? Who's going to pay the interpreter? Where's the interpreter going to be sitting?' These things then had to be sorted out, and now I have two full-time interpreters, Ronel and Ashley.

There was a time when we had to select the committees we wanted to sit on. There were 26 committees to select from. I decided, well, what is the biggest need of our deaf community? What do they need? It was: how TV could become accessible, because the TV is not accessible enough for us. So I thought, why not communications? Also there is Telkom: they are responsible for the phones. And the Post Office, there are lots of things there: deaf people stand in queues when they go to the Post Office, they get their grants there. So I thought why not go to the Portfolio Committee on Communications?

Secondly, yes I am a social worker, but I'm not in the mood once again to go and sit on welfare committees. But at that time parliament was in the process of setting up a new committee for youth, children, and disabled persons. They then

asked us, the members who were disabled, to sit on that committee, and I accepted because of my social work skills. I thought, I can use them there, and it's not going to be a welfare committee all the time.

Now I must tell you about my maiden speech. According to the rules of parliament, no non-members were allowed to go onto the floor. That's exactly the same for a blind person – a guide dog would not be allowed onto the floor. So I thought, well, what would now happen? Then on the day I had to speak they called me into the House – that was during lunch-time – and they asked me if the interpreter could stand next to me. I said: 'no, no, no, the interpreter cannot do that. She cannot see the signs from the side of me. Then they wanted the interpreter on the second floor, where we had a TV control room, where the interpreter could see me on the TV and watch me sign, and then voice what I was signing. I said: 'no, no; how must I know if I'm signing too fast, or the interpreter needs a drink of water, or the opposition is heckling me, or I need to wait if an order is being given?'

At the same time the other interpreter was explaining to the MPs why the interpreter needed to go onto the floor. And somehow a light bulb went on somewhere. I was then waiting and waiting, and when it was my turn to speak they just called my name and I did my speech. Afterwards my father explained to me that when the Deputy Speaker called me, at the same time she said: 'I rule that the interpreter can now take the floor.' She had to make that statement so that the opposition could not oppose the decision. I started my speech and I did it in Sign Language, and that was an historical moment, because that was the first time Sign Language was actually used in parliament.

My speech was on the budget vote for the Department of Communications. So I talked about how far parliament has

got, what they've done, what needs to be done. I also included issues regarding disabled people. I spoke about voice-activated equipment for blind people, and the need for interpreters. I questioned the Minister of Communications on these issues.

I was also told that this would be my first and last speech about disability issues; but I thought no, no, no, I'm not here not to speak about these issues. I will speak about these issues in all of my speeches, and I have done nine speeches so far. I believe that, if I don't, who will?

There has developed among deaf people a consciousness of having a separate culture. What makes up deaf culture?

I have noticed that deaf culture is common, internationally. When we talk about culture, we also mention values and norms. We look at what is valuable to us. Sign Language is important to deaf people, and so it's an important value to us.

Anything visual is valuable to us. For example, the light on the phone, the light for a doorbell, and we have a baby-cry alarm with a light. Anything that is visible is part of our culture. Sign Language interpreters are part of our culture, and technology used by the deaf community, like the Teldem. I think today the cellphone would be added – the sms, because that's something we love – and the fax machine and the e-mail. Technology has become a big asset to us.

A norm for us is, for example, you don't talk to us with your back turned. You must look at us. If we are lip reading, we cannot have your back facing us. And eye contact for us as deaf people is very important. Sometimes it is difficult, especially with black culture. Because if you look a black person in the eye, it is disrespect in their culture. But for us deaf people, we have to look into your eyes.

Some people, especially the hearing people, don't like you to touch them. But we as deaf people have to touch on you to get your attention. We have to pat on you. Sometimes when you touch the hearing person he will turn around and get very offended. For example, when we go to the supermarket, you want to tell somebody, please just move along. It's part of our culture.

For me, my hearing children, they have two cultures. They have to move between those cultures, between what the hearing accept and the deaf need. Let me give you an example. My son from small already, if he calls his daddy, he must go and pat daddy on his shoulder. And when he plays outside with the children, and Bruno comes with his car, he will flicker his lights, and only Antonio will notice. He will know that is how deaf people call each other.

An important part of this culture, as you say, is Sign Language. Is there a single Sign Language in South Africa, or are there different dialects? And can deaf people all understand each other?

Sign Language is somehow a contraversial issue. The bottom line is apartheid – it has destroyed a lot. The Dominican School in Wittebome was started by Irish nuns. They brought their Irish Sign Language along with them. Now at De La Bat in Worcester, at that school they use the British Sign Language – the same at St Vincent's in Johannesburg. And some of the Black schools were also started by Irish nuns, so they sign the same as us here in Cape Town. At the VN Naik School in Durban – it was originally an Indian school – the principal there went to Gallaudet and he came back with the American Sign Language. So we have different Sign Languages in different parts of the country.

That was during the apartheid years. We never came together and met one another. Only later on, just before 1994

and after, more provincial meetings and national meetings were happening. We then noticed who was signing the same and who was signing differently. For example, at youth camps and leadership training – we started merging the signs and we would all pick up the dominant sign.

Also, you must remember the education in South Africa was poor, so many words the deaf never knew. For example, the word ‘responsibility’. What does it mean? We never had a sign for ‘responsibility’. We would then copy it from another country, or we would make up that sign to fit us here. So, a lot of the signs are new, or maybe mixed, but all acceptable. And all Sign Languages follow the same grammar, the same structure, internationally as well.

And how do you pick a sign to identify a person?

It depends. Ronel, my interpreter, has long frizzy hair; so we make hands curling down to the shoulders, and that would be her sign. My son has a dimple on his cheek and his name is Antonio. So we take the A and put the thumb to the cheek. Ashley, my other interpreter, wears an earring in one ear. So we pinch the ear and that would be his sign.

And what about relaxation? What do you like doing when you are at home?

I must tell you – it’s difficult to relax with a deaf husband. We talk all the time. Because there is no captioning on TV, we constantly take out DVD’s and watch movies, because of the subtitling. And I love reading; it helps me to escape, all the problems one has. Wilbur Smith, Sydney Sheldon – I love their books; but definitely not Stephen King. His things are too scary for me.

How long do you think you'll be in parliament? At what point would you move on?

Five years here are not enough. It took me a long time to learn how things work around here, how to make laws and how laws are implemented. I wouldn't mind staying another five years, but I would like to see more done.

What's at the back of my mind is the INDS. It's policy, yes, but why isn't it law? Why don't we have something like the ADA? I can't give the reason for that. We need to come together to debate those things. So, for now, that would be it.



Fadia Legedat, quadriplegic, has been a leading voice in the disability rights movement, advising many of the country's major South African corporations. She has worked at many levels, most recently as Co-Chief of the Government's the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), and now on the Board of the South African Employment Commission. She has her own consulting company, Closing the Gap, focusing on the area of disability employment opportunities.