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'Creating advantage out of disadvantage for young adults'

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Sihlalo 2020-2021 Christmas / New Year Newsletter

30/12/2020

Dear family and friends

I haven't written a newsletter since (I think) March-April 2020. Thanks to all of you who queried whether you had been left off the mailing list, you are all still on it, just nothing has been sent! It has been a chaotic year and I have struggled with my reality here in Cape Town and how far from my Australian life it is. A real 'Beware of what you wish for' experience! I really worry about assimilating when I eventually do get back to Adelaide. Every day has been so different, and every day I think I have something concrete to write to my family and friends in another newsletter and then it all changes again. I have often felt isolated, it would be really hard for anyone in Australia who hasn't experienced Africa to understand the challenges here. As my friend Sarah says, Africa is not for cissies!

The inequities; so many different languages and accents (particularly difficult behind masks); the old-fashioned courtesies, and ways of doing things (in some of the shops things are so archaic that I expect to see those gas-filled cylinders that used to whizz around the ceiling taking money to the accounting department); the idioms and sayings ('We'll make a plan' is one of my favourites, even when there are no viable options); the obvious and disheartening corruption at all levels of Government and business (but the incredible honesty of people who have so little); and the constant need to be alert to danger on the streets (but the knowledge that the local gangs know my car and would never touch it when parked out the front of the workshop because I am 'ok'). One good thing is that with so many people working from home through Covid, the traffic congestion isn't nearly as bad as it used to be, although the informal minibus taxis continue to terrorise the roads, often jam packed with people with no masks and no social distancing....talk about Corona hotspots all zooming around the city. Add to that the challenges of Corona post first wave, with a 51% unemployment rate that hasn't changed since September, and the continuing National state of disaster and lockdown regulations, and restrictions on personal freedoms, it has been a really confronting year. But not just for me, everyone is reeling!

I have been particularly overwhelmed by navigating the issues of culture, and post-colonisation, and how they affect relationships here between people, and the assumptions people make. I have a workforce of wonderful young men in my workshop who all have such different backgrounds from different African nationalities, and they have so much to teach me, and so many life experiences that I would never imagine. And they think that because I am white and educated and have a (sort of) business plan I know better than they do. It has been difficult understanding when things go wrong what is 'Africa' and something I have to learn from (and live with), and what is just universally unacceptable behaviour? So many people have crossed my path this year whom I have learnt from, and who have helped me, even though they might never have known it. I even got to dance Jerusalema in the street performance organised by the business next door. The fervour with which the homeless people over the road joined in was so humbling! Attached are just a few of my 2020 highlights!



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This is Sarah Haines, who has literally saved my mental health this year. She lives next door to me, and we exercised and ate together through the five weeks of hard lockdown (which were terrible by the way), and she has invested so much time and energy in the workshop when her own heritage project 'The Long March to Freedom' was closed because of covid. She has had a lifetime of research into South African heritage and I have learnt so much from her. She is a talented artist and designer and has been responsible for many of the new products we have made this year.

This is the official toy tester, Fatima, who lives onsite with her parents. With the beautiful proteas we get locally. She has been front and centre this year at the workshop, as pre-school has been cancelled for most of the year. She has blown out all the candles on the cake at all staff birthdays this year and is actually quite confused about when her birthday is, because she has had so many of them!!! She is very smart and sassy, and even at 3, runs rings around both her parents in terms of English language, problem solving and managing to get her own way by reason. I love it when she rolls her eyes, spreads out her hands and goes 'well you see, Karen,). I so enjoy her company. She spends 1-2 nights a week with me and I try very hard to give her the stimulation she lacks at home.



This is the type of product coming from the workshop, a beautiful garden caddy made out of wood scraps from bigger projects. We have 5 young men working in the workshop now, making beautiful bespoke items. Pity the market is so flat, otherwise I imagine we might find it difficult to keep up production. All I can say is 'bring it on!'



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Here are four of the team, suitably masked up but not socially distanced! Wilson the workshop foreman, Justin the facilities manager, Ishmael the painter and decorator, and Phillip the upholsterer. The one missing is Kuda, an African mbira and marimba maker who has sort of infiltrated the team by trading payment for use of the workshop equipment. He is a very talented man. I bought him a pair of workboots for the workshop for occ health and safety. He has refused payment for any little thing he does for us since, saying 'he is still working off his boots'. They all have had miserable childhoods and little schooling, and very little formal training until they came to Sihlalo, but in general they have an incredible passion to learn. They are also so innovative when they have the confidence to try. The lack of opportunity that is just taken for granted here is demoralising.



Keith's WhatsApp management from Australia of the team and production processes in the workshop has been a lifesaver for us all, as well as demonstrating his astounding capacity to problem solve. The guys ring him with their inadequate English descriptions of a problem, and he generally sorts it out quickly and in ways they understand. Wilson in particular has the negotiation down pat, and somehow he and Keith have managed to sort out some very complicated woodworking problems in broken English (from Wilson) and Australianisms (from Keith) over poor internet connections and workshop noise. Whenever Fatima is part of any conversation with the workshop team, she usually pipes up with 'Should we ring Keith?' She loves talking to Keith and singing him her latest song, which always seems to be 'Three little kittens' accompanied by hand gestures and eye rolling....I don't think he has got a lot of sleep this year, with being available for the team whenever they need him, particularly with there being an 8 hour time difference. Thanks Keith for keeping things afloat from so far away and hearing me vent more than celebrate! This picture was of the guys celebrating the completion of a large order of Versailles planter boxes to go to Florida. Now that taught us about quality control and scheduling!

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One of Sarah's designs, the bespoke Sihlalo African animal wooden jigsaw puzzle where the pieces stand up and can be stacked one on top of the other. The puzzle has been affectionately named 'Scribble's puzzle' because he is Sarah's African cat (looks like a leopard, manx tail, black pads on his paws) and he was the inspiration for the lion. Fatima was making the puzzle with me over Christmas and she refused to put the snake in, not because she didn't know where it went, but because she doesn't like snakes! 'He can live under the cupboard' was her decision.

Sihlalo hosted a four-week puppet making workshop in November, funded generously by an Australian donor. Many thanks Kevin!!! 11 local children started but there were a number of subsequent ring-ins so the final number on week 4 was more like 16. They learnt to make puppets from recycled rubbish and they then produced and presented a play about their perceptions of the Corona virus. Whilst the whole process was very noisy and a lot of fun was had by all, I got most amusement from the new kids who turned up on weeks 2-4 swearing that they had attended the week previously. As part of Covid regulations we have to test temperatures, record names and contact numbers, and sanitise everyone who comes into the building. As they were all wearing masks it was quite challenging to tell the kids apart! When challenged they all had a good reason as to why they were there.... 'I'm Yusef's brother, I was going to come last week but I am here now' or 'I live next door to Believe and he said it was fun' etc.



As African drums were also part of the performance there seemed to be plenty to occupy everyone! Here is Blessing and her puppet after the first workshop. It took very little to bring these puppet characters to life. The kids had wonderful names, like Blessing, Believe, Glory, Happy, Prayer, Priceless and variations on royalty (Prince, Princess, Queen).

We have been given more Australian donations sufficient that we can rerun the puppet workshop next year, albeit in a more organised fashion, and for longer. Many thanks to Jo, and to my parents Ken and Anne. We are also lucky to have leadership from an immensely talented puppetier and wire worker, who



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drew the children into the fantasy of puppets so easily, and within four weeks had them writing and presenting their own scripts for their puppet characters. My learnings were that there is never enough food, it is very hard to tell children apart behind their masks, African children make a lot of noise, they will make any excuse to be part of theatre and art, and that crowd control is essential, particularly when African drumming and afternoon tea is involved.



One of the many toys that our workshop team has made are these beautiful African animals on wheels. We are selling them as sets of 4 at the moment (giraffe, lion, elephant and rhino). I think there is a buffalo in the queue, he is harder to cut in 3D because of his horns. The expertise required to pick the appropriate wood and cut it so it doesn't break, cut wheels that are silky smooth and then mount them so that they run true has eluded us on many occasions! But I think we are getting there.

We also made a beautiful African Christmas nativity from wood offcuts from other projects. The workshop team is learning by default about different types of wood and how well (or poorly) it cuts. I have been appointed the official wood oiler and final arbiter of quality. I have always loved wood and I am learning so much about how to ensure a quality finish. I have certainly got the teak oil mastered! We are cutting animals out of garapa, blackwood, meranti and oregon pine, and also from sustainable birchply. It has been a vertical learning curve year for me!





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We hosted a number of concerts on the Upper Deck at Sihlalo this year, dodging most of the strict Covid closures. We have been very fortunate in having the generous loan of a lovely grand piano from a local piano store. This has really made the difference. I have tried to make the space as much like Peter Bok's gallery space as possible, to remind me of home!

We could get away with the concerts because we have an intimate venue, we could control numbers and we could socially distance people. Here is a back of space view of our last performance by a very talented local pianist. After having gone a lot of this year not being able to find the time or energy to play piano, this concert inspired me to get back to serious playing. So I am planning a concert in the new year as soon as the corona lockdown allows gatherings again. So since mid December there has been the incongruity of Beethoven, Chopin, Scriabin and Ravel rolling out over Foundry Road, the trains rumbling by, mingling with the sounds of the African food market on the corner, and the old-fashioned rag and bone men and their horses who regularly go past. Who knows what the passers-by think?

I had the fun of attending the graduation of two of my PhD students in December at Stellenbosch. It was a very weird affair, with masking, social distancing, no hugging or hand shaking. There was such a limit on numbers that the academic processing was a non-event, but both students were very special to me and their journeys had been difficult, so it was a joy to share in the official end to their study. At least I know who is in the picture!





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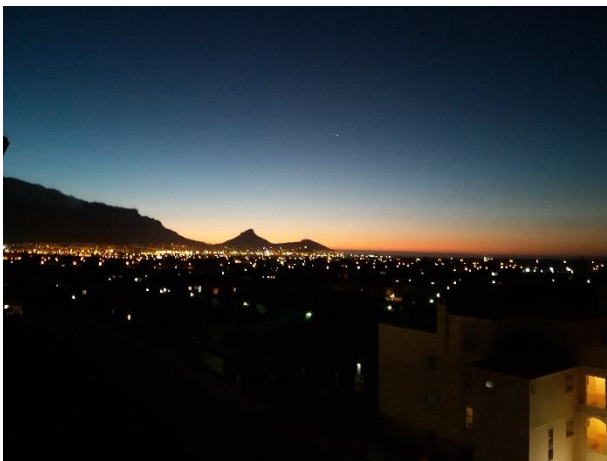
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One of Sarah's many lessons for me is to celebrate small successes, and to give certificates. We held our end-of-year party at her amazing installation which consists of 100 lifesize bronze statues of people who played an important part in African freedom fighting. All seven staff members (including the barista and the cleaner) got certificates celebrating their roles, no matter how small. And as usual, Sarah was right, the Certificates and the presentation were a highlight. This picture has appeared on Facebook and Instagram pages many times! Sorry Keith but I am very good at forging your signature now!

Here they all are in front of the statues of Nelson and Winnie Mandela. Children were invited, somehow between 7 staff members we ended up with 19 children, I am certain that they weren't all direct descendents of the workshop team...for many it was their first ever Christmas party and there was absolutely no food left!

We hosted our first Christmas market at Sihlalo in an attempt to attract people to the workshop space. It forced us to redo the brick floor on the dock with sand and cement, clear the dock of every broken piece of furniture that had accumulated there this year, and decorate it with greenery and Christmas lights, chandeliers, hanging furniture and paintings. It was nice to end the year with one clean space, I close my eyes in the workshop though because I don't know where to start!



And at night, I still have this view to admire from my balcony. This view varies depending on load shedding (random loss of power to preserve ageing generators, in which case there are no lights), fog (which can roll in so fast that one minute you can see the sea, the next you can't see your own hand) and the wind, which can literally knock you off your feet! One night load shedding coincided with heavy fog. It was the eeriest feeling that absolutely nothing was out there. I was anticipating load shedding tonight, but as usual it hasn't happened as planned, I bet it goes off just when I am making my cup of tea? Like the water



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last night that went off, just as I was getting into the shower!

Many thanks to so many of you for your continued contacts, and your understanding of my random responses. It has been a year of lessons, opportunities, huge challenges, uncertainties, and small and large joys. At my age I never imagined that I would be so independent and resourceful, or so good at enjoying my own company. I have learnt to stand up for myself, and to be a lot more direct than I have ever been in my life. This might have stood me in good stead had I been able to do this in my previous life? I don't anticipate returning to Australia until at least mid 2021. South Africa is currently in the middle of the second Corona wave, which is much more troubling than the first, and killing more people. As of 2 nights ago we have gone back to Lockdown 3, with no alcohol sales, 9pm curfew, no indoor or outdoor gatherings, beaches and parks shut. Whilst this is only supposed to be for 2 weeks, consensus has it that it will extend until at least end February. Half the physiotherapy tutors at Stellenbosch Uni are sick, some very ill, evidence of the load that the frontline staff are carrying. Quite a few students are sick as well as they have had a baptism of fire with clinical placements. There are no free ICU beds in public or private hospitals. Whilst there is talk of a vaccine, it is a long way off from getting to Africa, and I am much safer in Cape Town than I would be in transit to Adelaide. Please keep your emails and WhatsApps coming, I value the contacts very much. I even watched an episode of the Block the other night, just to hear the Aussie accent!

Much love, and may 2021 be safe, healthy and happy for you all! *Karen*