

Working in the Townships: A Report from Capetown, South Africa Eldbjorg Gjessing Paulsen, Arendal, Norway

In February of this year I once again had the opportunity to work for several weeks in Philippi and Khayelitsha together with Ann Sharfman, one of the main people responsible for the projects run by the Centre for Creative Education in the Townships. The Centre is situated in Cape Town and provides part-time primary and kindergarten teacher training, full-time eurythmy training, and also part-time training courses for “Educare” teachers in Philippi. Falling under the mentorship of the center are several schools and kindergartens in Philippi, Tambo Village and Khayelitsha.

Last year when I spent about two months working in the Centre, I was given some insight into the work that has been and is being done in the slum areas. My admiration grows, the more I see and experience.

The Road to the Township

Even though I had seen it all before, the impressions on the long way into the township were just as overwhelming as they had been the first time. The streets are filthy; the shacks look as if they’re about to fall over; you see cows, goats and dogs digging in the rubbish looking for food. The women queueing to fill their water buckets from a single tap, and the small stall vendors sell food surrounded by piles of rotting garbage. Men sit along the roadside hoping someone will stop and offer them a day’s work. Some are lucky and are offered employment, but the majority waits in vain, and the days become months. The slum areas are enormous, the misery and poverty defy description, and yet these are ordinary people who want the ordinary things of life: to make a living and to have a little dignity.

This is the visible, everyday life for these people. What we do not see on a daily basis, but which we hear about and know is happening, is the crime, the violence and constant trauma, which will, undoubtedly, influence the children’s lives and development. If there is to be any hope at all for tomorrow, we must give today’s children the right conditions for a decent start in life. The work done by the Centre for Creative Education is, giving some of these children a chance to develop the more positive side of life, which in turn will provide them with the strength to handle society as it is and to help change where change is needed.

The Centre in Philippi

The Centre for Creative Education was opened in November 1998. In addition to holding seminars for part-time students leading to a “Certificate in Waldorf Educare”, the Centre has two preschool groups for children under three, two kindergartens for three-to six-year-olds, and a Waldorf school with grades one and two.

The Centre’s part-time students meet for two-week blocks several times a year. Most of the women receiving this training work full-time in a kindergarten. Some have started a kindergarten in their own houses. In addition to Khayelitsha and Philippi, there are other places, such as the Eastern Cape, where the needs are just as great and where the state is willing to give economic support. The Centre for Creative Education has therefore committed to running courses there. Four times a year four teachers go to the Transkei in the Eastern Cape and give a two-week course for 23 students in Idutywa (a further 20 motivated by the local Education Department will

join next time), and for 42 students in Mount Frere. The interest was so great that after the first two weeks a further twenty applicants, unfortunately, had to be turned away.

The Centre's Vision

The aim of the work in the townships is to give as many children as possible the benefit of Waldorf education through building schools and training teachers. There is a great lack of experienced teachers who are willing to work in the townships, be it on short term or long term basis. And money is needed for the on-going training of new teachers. Experienced volunteers willing to work part-time in the townships, maybe for three months at a time, are desperately sought after.

Appeal

I have asked myself how Rudolf Steiner's understanding of the development of the human being can be applied around the world to help children to develop as healthy human beings among varied cultural, religious, and economic conditions. I found some answers in the Waldorf kindergartens of South Africa's townships where it was confirmed that it really doesn't matter where in the world you are – the initial start to life is the same everywhere.

Through the filth, the misery, and the seeming hopelessness of it all, the people of South Africa have an open enthusiasm, warmth, joy, and above all, a sense of humor which I have encountered nowhere else. These qualities have stimulated humility and gratitude in me and have awakened in me a wish to contribute something to the work done in the townships; a desire to help create conditions in which children can develop their positive side, have good childhood memories, and know that there are people in this world who care. With such a background they will have a greater chance of later becoming active citizens who can help create a better society.

For the women of the townships who are training as teachers, it is a struggle to gain self-confidence and an assurance that they can make a difference. Hence my great enjoyment in watching them create something beautiful and to see how much it means to them to put color into everyday life by producing items which can be used with the children. For me it has been invaluable to talk with these women about the meaning of being a person and to hear them verbalize the thoughts and dreams we all have. In spite of our dissimilar backgrounds, we share so much in our views on children and on being human. We have the same dreams, the same love for children, and common hopes for the future, and we all realize the importance of protecting a child's growing years, whether in Norway or South Africa.

Learning about the African people and becoming conscious of what is happening to childhood all over the world has enriched my work in Norway. I now feel that I am a member of a truly worldwide organization, irrespective of background and opportunities. We have so very much to learn from each other.

There is a great need for monetary donations and for experienced Waldorf-trained people to do volunteer work in the townships. The hours are long, the conditions will be a cultural shock, you will weep, and you will despair; but when you go home I know your heart will belong to Africa. You will be rich beyond words, beyond money.

One person alone cannot change the world, but together we can make a start.

For more information about helping out in South Africa, contact Joan Almon at (301) 699-9058.