

Khukuleka: Sisters Worlds Apart

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The Santa Cruz Waldorf School is on a journey, moving beyond our school and our American culture to a world most of us will never experience. We are sponsoring Khukuleka, a developing Waldorf School in the Philippi Township of Cape Town, South Africa. What connects our two schools is Waldorf education.

Thirteen years ago, I attended a conference in San Francisco. There was a presentation by Jürgen Flinspach, treasurer of the International Association of Waldorf Kindergartens. He brought slides and stories of kindergartens from around the world. My attention focused on one slide, a picture of a school without a classroom. Kindergarten was under a very large baobab tree and a hundred and fifty students came from miles, with no tables, toys, play cloths, or equipment. This image impressed me because such a school in our country is unheard of. I longed to go to South Africa to see that school (which is near Johannesburg and a thousand miles north of Cape Town) and to see Waldorf education flourish in a country that is so different from the world in which I teach.

Three years ago, Joan Almon spoke at a teacher's conference in Fair Oaks, California. She was asking for cash donations for a school in the poor, rural suburbs of Cape Town. They needed money in order to buy materials to finish a straw bale building. Half of this building would be a kindergarten classroom; the other half would be a teacher-training classroom. I gave money, but I also asked her how we could develop a relationship with this school. Joan connected me with Ann Sharfman at the Centre for Creative Education in Cape Town. The Centre specializes in the education and support of kindergartens in the poorest areas around Cape Town. Ann and I wrote back and forth. She sent photographs and a brochure and described the environment and the work that she is doing as a teacher of teachers.

The majority of the parents in the Philippi Township are unemployed. People leave their homes in search of work in the city, often leaving children at home to fend for themselves. They live in ramshackle huts made of materials found in construction sites and landfills. Sometimes two toilets and a washbasin are in between two huts of corrugated steel. Some huts have running water, others do without. It is hard to escape the poverty that predominates. The Waldorf teacher training is offering a way out for the women who take the training and start kindergartens in these areas. It is in this environment that one of Ann's pupils, Nombulelo Majezi, founded the Kindergarten Khukuleka. Ann encouraged us to become a sponsor of this school.

The faculty at the Santa Cruz Waldorf School decided to support Khukuleka. We began to inform the parent body about our project. We started showing pictures of the nearly complete building and the beautiful faces of the children, and we shared the list of the school's most needed items. We began slowly that year and in the last two weeks of school raised only \$325. This may seem like a small amount, but in South Africa it is worth three times as much. This money helped them buy supplies and materials too large or heavy for us to mail. We also asked for donations of used kindergarten toys and materials. When school ended, the kindergarten teachers cleaned out their cupboards and found extra silks, cloths, puppets, and various materials in good condition to send to the Khukuleka School.

We have in our school community a woman who grew up in Cape Town. Her parents still live there and she was going back home that summer. She took a suitcase and a box full of the treasures we had collected. Not only did Gayle deliver the goods, she came back with stories and

more photographs. She told these stories to the community at our back-to-school night in September. Our gifts were received with much appreciation. Gayle met Ann at the Centre and together they traveled out to the rural district of Philippi. Khukuleka is on a piece of property fenced with barbed wire. It can be a very unsafe place to be if you are white. One time, as Ann arrived at the gate of the school, some young native men held her at gunpoint and stole her car.

The teacher, Nombulelo, started caring for children in her home, and in time the government gave her a piece of property for the school. When the new school building was almost finished, tools and materials were left out one night ready for the next day's work. In the morning, everything had been stolen. Nombulelo called the people in her community together and said to them that these children were their children; this was their school and these children and this school were their future. She expected all the materials back by twelve noon. Everything was returned except two small tools.

Children are not turned away from the school; the kindergarten class size is about twenty-eight but the preschoolers and toddlers number between thirty-five and forty. There are very few soft and cuddly things for the children to play with. It will be one of our projects to remedy that this year!

Gayle's visit confirmed to us the importance of our connection. At times, in the beginning of this process, I felt we were stretching ourselves across the world not knowing if we were really meeting their needs. There is a time delay between our work and their receiving it. The school year goes by quickly. We hear from Ann two or three times a year, and because we do not speak the native tongue, Xhosa, we have yet to speak to the people we serve.

A year ago, one of our kindergarten teachers met Ann in Switzerland at a conference. She brought with her a thank you gift from Nombulelo. It was a set of table puppets! It was gratifying to have received these, for it meant our relationship was appreciated. Most of all, the spirit of Khukulela came to Santa Cruz.

This past school year, more parents stepped forward to help. Several teachers became interested in having their classes make kindergarten playthings to send to the Philippi school. Our sixth grade knitted woolen ties and the third grade plant-dyed silk and cotton cloths. Some parents made simple table puppets. Even people who are outside our immediate community wanted to become involved. My mother, who is eighty-three years old, made about ninety knitted pixie dolls and wants to make more.

We set up a booth with these toys at our May Fair. What we did not sell at the fair we sent to our sister school this summer along with the money we raised. We also organized a bake sale in the fall and a strawberry shortcake sale at our end-of-year picnic. We raised \$1200 from these sales and from donations during the year. We were fortunate to have Gayle's parents visit Santa Cruz this summer. When they returned home to Cape Town they took with them our collection of toys and some donated flutes.

As more parents, teachers and classes become involved, enthusiasm and interest grows. In our efforts to extend a hand to our sister school, our community is strengthened. I am happy to be nurturing Waldorf education in the world and look forward to another year helping our sister school better serve its children and community. Perhaps one day I will go to South Africa to shake the hand of my sister, Nombulelo, and see the country where the baobab tree grows.