



A Safe Haven

By Jessica Heddenhausen '13

Photos by Lucy Pellett and Jessica Heddenhausen

“Together as a nation, we have the obligation to put sunshine into the hearts of our little ones. They are our precious possessions. They deserve what happiness life can offer.” – Nelson Mandela, 1997

Although I grew up in Germany, my maternal South African roots gave me a second home to which I always hoped to return. Throughout my childhood, whenever we had the opportunity to visit my grandparents in Johannesburg and Cape Town, we would pass through the informal settlements on the way from the airport. In fact, some of my earliest memories are of handing food through the car window to the children on the side of the road and visiting African markets where we knew the artists were living in shacks made of corrugated iron and plastic bags.

At the age of eleven, when we were still living in Germany, my father was transferred to Seattle, WA. In order to reunite our family, we decided to follow him across the Atlantic. In preparation of our move to Seattle, my mother took my brother and me to learn English in a small town called Knysna, located on the Garden Route in the Southern Cape of South Africa. During this time (in 2007) we lived with my grandparents who introduced us to their church, The Island Church.

My grandfather and members of The Island Church involved us in their missions at the local informal settlement. They were feeding hundreds of starving children at a soup kitchen, teaching them about team sports and team building, and starting a school for children who needed a safe place to go during the day while their parents searched for work. South African townships have refugees from a multitude of neighboring countries as well as South Africans, all desperate for help in the way of food, medicine, work, and prayer.

Although I was only twelve years old, I was profoundly influenced by life in South Africa. Throughout my school career, I longed to return and continue in the mission field. I made up my mind that as soon as I graduated from high school I would find my way back to the children on the hill in the little town of Knysna. I knew that at the age of eighteen I would be able to make a greater impact on their lives and would have a better chance of showing them the love of Jesus.

I graduated from The Bear Creek School in 2013, and realizing



how committed I was to return to South Africa, my grandfather very generously brought my mum and me back to Knysna. He had saved up since we left seven years ago so that we could indeed return.

Since 2007 The Island Church has built another school in an informal settlement called Hlalani, which is also in Knysna. This school is named Indlu Ka Bawo, which means The House of the Lord. Since we arrived in November 2013, we have already shared many incredible experiences with the children at Hlalani. Watching God's presence in this place and its people. Tanya, a lady who lives at Hlalani and teaches the children, is a remarkable blessing. Her devotion to the children despite her personal tribulations of poverty and abuse, is evermore so inspiring. It is incredibly uplifting to meet people like “Teacher Tanya”, who have so little, yet invest themselves in the work of others to bring them joy. Even without the essentials for survival, through their faith in Jesus, their prayer, and music, they push through hardships and grow spiritually.

In December my mum and I wanted to teach the children at Indlu Ka Bawo about the meaning of Christmas and treat each of them to a small Christmas gift. We wrapped up little toy cars in Christmas paper and went to Hlalani. We explained to the children that people give and receive gifts at Christmas time to remember Jesus, God's Son, His greatest gift to us. After we handed out the brightly wrapped gifts we noticed that the correlation between Jesus and the gift was lost on them, as these children had never before received a gift of any sort. Ten minutes had passed when they were all still holding on to their wrapped gifts tightly. One little boy began to cry when he accidentally pierced the wrapping paper with his thumb and thought he'd destroyed his gift. They didn't realize that there was something inside the colorful paper. You can imagine the looks on their faces when we showed them how to unwrap the paper to see what was inside. It was all too much for them. Sheer delight! This day will forever be one of my favorite memories.

Another of my most treasured experiences took place just before Christmas when The Island Church organized a Christmas dinner for the homeless. We went around Knysna and invited people on the streets to our church for roast chicken, vegetable bakes, juice, and desserts. We decorated tables with fine crockery, cutlery, and Christmas decorations,

so each table would be festive and inviting to our guests. When they arrived we served them so they would feel special and their self-respect would be restored. “Fit for a king” was our motto that afternoon. We wanted to make them feel like royalty—like the precious children of God they are. Watching them enjoy a safe place to sit, rest, and eat, gave me a feeling of ultimate peace, one that only comes from pure joy. After the men and women had finished eating, we prayed with them. Many grown men were brought to tears that day, and some even felt inspired to accept Jesus into their lives. It has been so moving to see them return to church every Sunday.

God had more than one purpose for our visit to South Africa. He had plans for us we were not aware of, and a new project we only recently discovered. Two ladies looking for help, approached my grandfather and his best friend from church in regard to excessive child abuse in their small village of Rheenedal, about 10 km out of Knysna.

Rheenedal has a population of about 4000 people who were formerly employed by local farms and the timber industry. Following the demise of these employment opportunities, the community became destitute and has experienced a staggering increase in crime. The high rate of alcoholism in Rheenedal, and the behavior of the drunken, unemployed people have become a threat to the local community, especially the children, as a large percentage of them are homeless, and therefore in danger of abuse. Gangs of teenage boys are aimlessly roaming the streets after school looking for their prey who have no place to go for safety and no one to ask for protection.

Just recently in August 2013, nine-year-old, Rosaline Philander was raped and killed by her uncle in Rheenedal. Following her mother's death two years ago, her alcoholic father neglected her. Rosaline was starving when her uncle offered to buy her food. Trusting him, she followed him, and as a consequence was brutally abused and murdered. In addition to the homeless children like Rosaline, Rheenedal is also struggling to protect the many children being sold into the sex trade as their parents often resort to desperate measures in order to generate an income.

In December the same two ladies introduced us to Basil, the local pastor of Rheenedal. Basil has taken in 40 homeless children who





sleep and find shelter in the little chapel attached to his house since the number of homeless children so drastically increased in recent months. In total there are 100 children in grave need of a place to go for food and shelter. That day we had a long meeting with Basil and met the children. We were invited to sit at the front of the chapel, facing the little children, as the Pastor explained their predicament. By gazing into their eyes, I was looking deep into their souls. They were crying out for help and I could feel their distress resonating within me. I know the children feel helpless, but I am determined to work hard to shape, build, and develop a safe haven for them. Though they may have been forgotten and feel lost, through prayer they will become our children. As it is said in an old African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child."

My grandfather and I will be meeting with the local municipality in January to look for a piece of land to purchase in order to build a safe house. Because we presently don't have a building, we will have to rent a house until the safe house becomes a reality. Starting the safe haven in Rheenedal is such a critical project that I believe it to be the reason



God wanted me to return to South Africa.

Currently we are working on our first step to provide security for the children, raising funds for the land and the building. Until then, the children are at risk because they have nowhere to go. After we have reached that goal, we will need to find support for the supply of food and bare essentials.

Since living outside of the nurturing environment of The Bear Creek School, the world has become a more serious place. Beyond the stress of exams and class grades, I have discovered and become involved in true struggles for survival. Though it may seem like the end of the world when grades don't match efforts, there are children half our age and younger, fighting to prevent what might literally be the end of their existence. I hope with all my heart that I can make a difference while I am here and leave them with something that will protect future generations.

"Our children are our greatest treasure. They are our future. Those who abuse them tear at the fabric of our society and weaken our nation."
 – Nelson Mandela, 1997

When I return to Seattle, I will continue to pursue this dream because it has become my life's mission. Hopefully these stories paint a picture of my world today. Although there are so many problems with poverty and crime, South Africa is truly a magnificent country with so much to offer.

