

It's possible to tackle the education shortfalls

KIM FEINBERG is helping orphan and vulnerable kids by giving them academic and psychosocial support through her education trust, the Tomorrow Trust. Feinberg is proving that it isn't impossible to tackle the huge education shortfalls experienced by vulnerable South African orphans. After a recent survey, which found that 70% of grade six learners were illiterate and innumerate, Feinberg's Tomorrow Trust is a welcome helping of hope to everyone who hears about it.

The Trust, which was founded in 2005, partners with grass-roots organisations and schools that work with orphans as well as vulnerable children and youth to give them the opportunity to become self-sustaining and to release them from the charity cycle. Initially focused on damage control for matrics, the programmes were soon extended from Grade R to Grade 6 and from Grade 10 to 12 and post-matric education support. "By the time these students get to Grade 10 they exhibit huge gaps in their education. There's very little foundation phase that has been learnt," says Feinberg.

The Johannesburg local's drive to become one of the country's most successful social entrepreneurs surprisingly started the moment she walked out of a cinema. *Schindler's List* inspired Feinberg to embark on a series of social projects, including publishing three books using oral histories and becoming a founding director of the Apartheid Museum. She started Tolerance Foundation, which taught over 70 000 learners across South Africa life skills using history as the vehicle. This led to her becoming an Ashoka Fellow.

But it was after her first experience with Aids orphans seven years ago that she realised there was a desperate and massive need to provide these children with a sense of security. "The word 'tomorrow' is the only word they don't take for granted – they don't know where they will be, who will be there with them. For a child this should be a stable issue."

She also realised that there wasn't a single organisation at the time that catered solely for the education of orphan and vulnerable children and youth. "What became clear was that mothers were leaving their

children with the idea that only education can get you out of your situation."

Her vision has changed somewhat to include all vulnerable children, not just those classified as Aids orphans, and Tomorrow Trust currently has 1 500 children in the Tomorrow Trust with 67 graduating with diplomas and degrees. By her own admission, she has amazing trustees and patrons such as Mervyn King and Jack Phalane. Cyril Ramaphosa was one of the founding trustees. And the beauty is that the Trust's model can be rolled out nationally, as budget allows.

Learners are bussed out of townships on Saturdays and holidays and taken to suburban, often private or top Government schools where they are given nutritional food in a full breakfast and lunch, stationery, notes, calculators and the best teachers. Tertiary support works differently – learners studying for a diploma or a degree receive pocket money, a cellphone and a call from one of the Tomorrow Trust's employees every week to check up on their mental and academic situation and living conditions. Tomorrow Trust has a teacher development programme as well.

Even though Feinberg is petite and pretty, she's no softy. "I've had to get one of our kids out of bed over the phone when she was so depressed she couldn't study – she was supporting 10 people at the time. Today, she works at a corporate in Pretoria and is totally self-reliant."

Tertiary students are encouraged to donate 10% of their monthly salary for two years once employed. This supports other students and shows the alumni that they can make a difference to others.

"Our learners are getting great internships at large corporates. We've got chefs, beauticians, and some of them are working for us. We're breaking the cycle of poverty."

One of the Trust's learners, Vivian Thakhuli, addressed the United Nations in New York last month for the Culmination of the Year for Youth. ■

Kim Feinberg

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