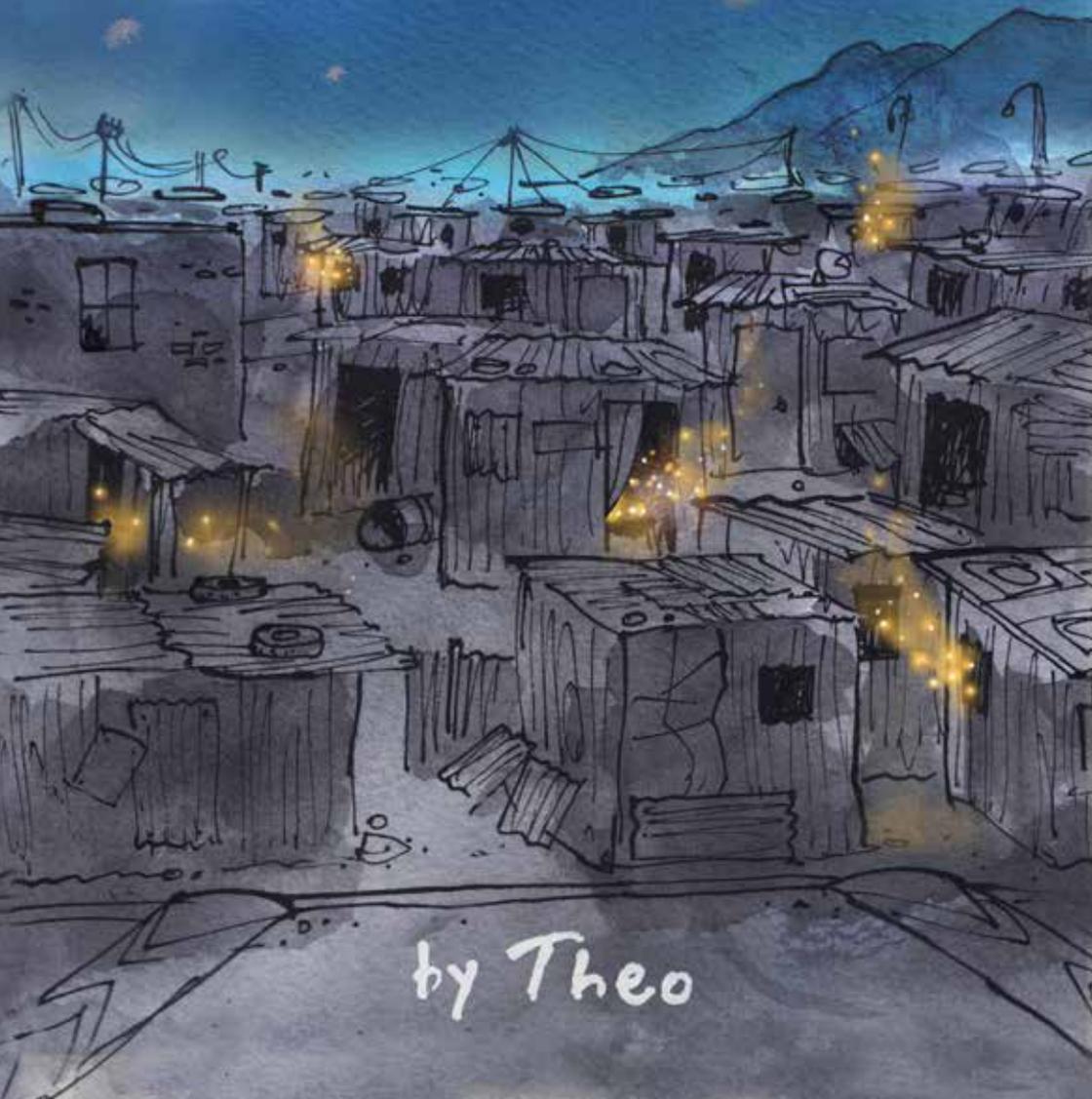


# Just a Glimpse

10 Years of Sparklekids



by Theo

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ANGIE.  
TOGETHER... ALWAYS.



Kindly sponsored by Dr Niells.  
*Illustrations by Theodore Key.*

# INTRODUCTION

**“Now you know why you started Sparklekids.”**

**T**hese words, spoken to me by an old bookseller four years ago really stopped me in my tracks. It stirred something unanswered in me that had been lying dormant for all my life. The old bookseller helped me to find my kin and so, the search was over. All of this happened, can you believe this... on a platform called *Baby Come Home!*

My parents gave me away as an unwanted child sixty-two years ago. The two of them got married a year and a month after that and they had three more boys. But a very dark cloud hung over this family because of the secrecy and guilt that they put upon themselves. The effect of it all was huge and it left some very broken people behind. I often wished that I could just step back in time and tell them all to chill and let themselves off the hook, please... because I think my life turned out just great.

After being handed over five times from one person to the next, I was eventually adopted into a very loving and caring family to whom I am eternally grateful. But throughout my entire life, I felt different – the odd one out – and there was this subconscious searching and a longing to connect, to heal, and to bring people hope. So, Angie and I started Sparklekids.

We arrived in Hermanus in February of 2011 in an old station wagon, with a tiny black cat called Mrs Fletcher and a fat sausage dog, Basil. Throughout our time together we had a desire to live a meaningful life, and when we felt that our own three boys were reasonably settled, we decided to sell all we had up north and make the big move.

Our eldest son, also Theo, is a book illustrator and artist. Our middle one, John, is an anaesthetist, and our youngest son, David, is a teacher, artist and mindfulness and meditation coach. All very good-looking... Takes after their mother.

Our fourth boy, Keith, we delivered ourselves in our car, a 1962 avocado green Austin Princess early on a rainy morning. Halfway to the hospital, Angie's water broke, a few miles later the baby was out and looking at the scenery. Being me, I took the wrong turn off, and by the time we reached the hospital, all that the panic-stricken nurses had to do was cut the umbilical cord. Keith did not make it past four months though. I think he knew what was coming and decided to jump ship.

We also have a delightful adopted Chinese daughter Lily, who has been a part of our lives for the past nearly twenty years. She is now happily married and recently had a little girl named Yo-Ning Angie. They live in Taiwan.

Ten years later and here we are. The impact and the life-changing effect of it all was so

incredible that I decided to write this little book to give you a glimpse into the world of our young people. Hopefully, this will touch you as deeply as it has touched us.

I selected ten Sparklekids, one representing each year, set up heart-to-heart talks with each one of them to make certain that all the facts are straight, and the writing began. But let's go back to the very beginning.

Angie and I make a good team. I tend to go full steam ahead, see opportunities and take shortcuts, just get on with it, and stick religiously to my old and trusted recipe of repentance being so much easier than permission. Angie is the opposite. She is pure goodness. She is wise, considerate, supportive, and did I forget to mention, pleasing on the eye.

Anita and Lungisa were our first two Sparklekids. Anita has attained a double degree in chemistry from The University of the Witwatersrand and is now working as a chemical engineer. Lungisa is a qualified civil engineer who is busy building roads all over South Africa.

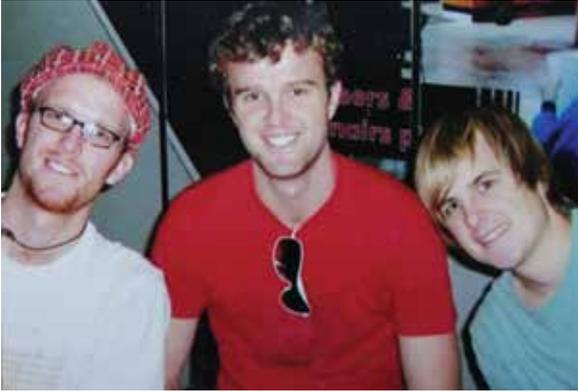
People often think that we are falsely modest when we say that what Sparklekids has done for us, far outweighs whatever we did for it. But let me tell you, it gave us a sense of purpose and meaning, a reason for getting up in the morning, excited about our lives. It made us better people. Meaningfulness transcends all conditioning, it makes you go beyond race, labeling and being easily disappointed. You forgive easier, it brings light into any situation.

The Laurens van der Post quote written nearly 100 years ago resonates very deeply with me:

"The Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert talk about the two 'hungers'. There is the Great Hunger and there is the Little Hunger. The Little Hunger wants food for the belly; But the Great Hunger, the greatest hunger of all, is the hunger for meaning... There is ultimately only one thing that makes human beings deeply and profoundly bitter, and that is to have thrust upon them a life without meaning. There is nothing wrong in searching for happiness. But of far more comfort to the soul is something greater than happiness, and that is meaning. Because meaning transfigures all. Once what you are doing has meaning for you, it is irrelevant whether you're happy or unhappy...  
You are content,  
You are not alone in your Spirit,  
You belong."

Yup... that about sums it up for me.

But to tell the whole Sparklekids story, I also have to tell you about some of the wonderful and colourful people who walked down this long and winding road with us. All of them have two things in common. They do it for a greater reason, from the heart, and most of them became jolly good friends over the years.



**Theo Jr, John and David**



**Lily**



**Angie and Theo**



Dr Niells, the first one who believed in Sparklekids ten years ago. Nobody knows what he has done for so many people. This quiet, clever, grumbling, and unselfish man has been a constant support and soundboard to us. He paid for our first promotional DVD on our website. He also paid for us to go overseas eight years ago to fundraise.

For ten years we have seen his beautiful heart. Hardly a week will go by that he does not come past our house with either a kabeljou, a freshly baked batch of rusks, or a chocolate cake. He is the best baker in Hermanus. Now ten years later, Niells is still paying, this time for the printing of this book.

Dearest Dr Elvia, the most wonderful 93-year-old who has a passionate love for healing. Every penny that she receives as donations from patients of her homeopathic practice comes to Sparklekids, and much more. Her colourful life and trusted wisdom have inspired us to the moon and back. The Grand Dame still goes into Africa to pour her life into people and her patients travel from all over the world to come and see her. I often say to her that when she goes, I go.

Dennis, the slightly crazy and eccentric wild Swedish former Headmaster who over the years has brought in, as hand luggage, nearly 150 second-hand laptops for our students, to be a motivation for achieving university exemption. There are 196 waiting to be brought over from Sweden still.

And Wilco, the gentle baker from Rotterdam who deeply feels children's hardship. Together with his wife Geesje, they spend all the time they can afford (and cannot afford) in Hermanus, and get their hands properly dirty wherever and whenever they can. Then back to Holland they go to bake and earn.

Sybille, who wanted the memory of her little sister Linda who died of Down syndrome and a leaky heart valve, to continue. The effect Lindy has had on people goes on and on through the LN Foundation.

Lou-Anne, who time after time stepped in to support many young people through internships as well as sponsoring and coaching at teachers' workshops. She made a whole lot of fantastic things possible over the years. Poor Lou-Anne must have dreaded my phone calls, but always just said, "Wooonderful to hear from you Theo."

Joké from Duchies and Francois from Harbour Rock, who never throughout all this time stopped being there for us. When Joké heard about this book she said, without hesitation, "Maar ik dring daarop aan!" that the launch be held at either one of their family's restaurants.

Francois, in the starting years of Sparklekids, trained so many young people in the skills of cooking and baking at the Rock, all from his own pocket. Many young people found employment from this kick-start in life.

Dr Claude, who when asked to help disadvantaged people always says, "Bring them all!"

We are becoming family soon and we are so happy about that!

To see a young person, especially a young girl with crooked or bad front teeth walk out of his surgery with a brand-new smile is too wonderful to see. No more hiding behind a shy hand with eyes cast down. This is life-changing. I never know who is more pleased, Claude or the girl.

Dr Sindiwe Magona, who had to claw her way out of poverty and whose life story is beyond belief – Google her, please. Well into her seventies, she gave up a year and a half for our workshops and camps with young kids while completing a Ph.D. (When the Village Sleeps).



She brags about Sparklekids from world stages wherever she goes. Award-winning author and recipient of three honorary doctorates... and she is with us, heart and soul.

Charlotte, whose daughter, on her way to becoming a paediatric oncologist, was tragically killed in a car accident after a long shift at Worcester Hospital. She will live on in the work that her mom does by teaching mathematics and investing in young people. Charlotte is elated every time a Sparklekid goes forward in life.

Our friend who now lives in Europe, who loves the underprivileged young people of our town, together with her husband who died a few years ago. She donated their home in Hermanus to Sparklekids so that we can carry on doing what we do in memory of her remarkable husband. She scattered his ashes in the beautiful garden a while ago. Sparkle House is now a place of education and life-changing therapy.

Karin, a psychologist works from there. She cares very deeply.

MiWay, who connected with us from the heart nine years ago, and who has donated two little pink Ford Figo's already, as well as funds towards monthly expenses.

Sam, who long boarded from Haarlem in Holland to Berlin, Germany – nearly 700km; and Bruce, who as an elderly man walked 700km through England and Scotland. Both saw enough value in what we do to make these amazing journeys to raise funds for us.

Mary-Anne, stepping in with her sharp mind and caring heart whenever we need her to help with difficult problems. She knows only too well how much we value her.

Maartje at King Baudouin Foundation, who helped us to fund nearly half of the twenty-seven aspiring school teachers studying at Hermanus Varsity. This is our first year of

training teachers.

Watch this space very carefully...

Jens, Bente and Annette from Norway who by a sheer miracle stepped into our lives under an old Milkwood tree very recently and have opened their hearts to us – first impressions do last, I am so happy to say.

Dear old Bev, who kept us together all this time, calm and organised.

Johann, always ready to jump in and help, camera and all, in whatever we need done.

A dear friend from our past who stepped into our lives in a time of crises, allowing Angie and myself to continue doing what we are doing here in Hermanus. A very meaningful thing happened many years ago that involved all of us and she wanted the memory of her only son who died after years of suffering to continue through our work with young people. Grateful is not a strong enough word.

Archbishop Tutu who one day said to us, "Sparklekids puts a smile on God's Face." We really needed the encouragement at that time.

Mark and Tania who watched us very carefully, and then at great personal expense and sacrifice, gave and gave and gave. They really live their faith, and our hearts are knitted together forever in friendship. Sparklekids quantum-leapt forward because of this family.

"What you do for the least of these..."

All of this has empowered and enabled so many young people from various backgrounds and races to be helped towards self-support.

Every time I see hope kindle in the hearts of young people, I have a real sense of touching eternity. It is as if you then transcend the harsh face of reality for a while and for this, I have to thank the people who walked this journey with us.

We also have to shine a light on the people who, together with us, know that the only way forward for our country is to work towards breaking the severity of poverty. Poverty is the one thing that robs you of all choices.

No amount of welfare, praying or lamenting will achieve this. It can only be done by empowering people towards self-support through education and skills development. So many of our Sparklekids are now employed in well-earning jobs and have broken the stronghold of poverty over their own lives. They have dignity and they look life squarely in the eye, on equal terms with anybody. To see this is our reward.

Someone said, "Better to stand in awe of what people have had to carry... Rather than

standing in judgement as to how they carry it.”

Another thing is the love and loyalty and friendship that we have received from many of our Sparklekids. This has made everything much more than worth our while.

I remember the following incident from a few years ago so well. Thandiwe, one of our young people, was travelling back to college in Cape Town in a minibus taxi. This, apart from hitch-hiking, is the only affordable means of transport to cover the 140km journey.

Picture the scene: An overcrowded taxi, often less than safe, speeding along over mountains and dales. Thandiwe, a very slight but feisty young girl overhears a conversation between two people a few seats back, according to her, saying bad things about Sparklekids.

Oooh dear... big mistake. All hell broke loose in that taxi as she tackled those unsuspecting souls with “Don’t you dare do that to Uncle Theo” and “God will punish”, and “If you ever...” The incident went viral on social media with incredible comments and responses. God has much more mercy than Thandiwe. Loyalty... it is a deal-breaker.

There is something that touches me very deeply without fail.

When it is the end of the year and I receive all the WhatsApp’s with their results, I get heartfelt thank you notes from our young people. This one from one of our nursing students sums up many of these messages:

“While I was writing the exam and I knew that I’m doing well, I thought, Uncle Theo is going to be so proud of me.” I realized then that so often with so many of the Sparklekids, nobody cares whether they pass or fail. Our approval is all they will receive after a year’s hard work. It can be a lonely, lonely journey.

Whenever a Sparklekid meets us, even those from years ago, there is an instant joy and a warm embrace. There is an unspoken sense of gratitude from both sides. For them, being given the chance to study and be empowered by (as Dr Sindiwe always says), “The only husband that will never leave you – education”, and for us, the friendship and the fun.



I often say that I have never seen anyone with hope in their hearts burning and destroying. Hopelessness so often manifests into anger.

People who feel that they have no voice and no future, who knows, they may turn to burning and destroying. Building up

is always infinitely better than breaking down.

I have so often earnestly warned our young people not to get distracted from working towards self-support, in the shortest time possible. "Don't waste your time stopping and throwing stones at every barking dog along your way, and so never reach your destination."

The barking dog comes in many voices.

The ten Sparklekids whose stories are told here are examples of countless young people who from the heartache of the past that crippled our country into inequality, now have to forge an uncertain future with only one tool in hand: education.

I stand in awe of their lives, having travelled the road with them over the past ten years.

They are self-assured and hopeful,  
They just get on with it,  
They have a sparkle in their eyes,  
That is why they are called Sparklekids.

A wonderful thing that happened as a direct outflow from Sparklekids was the start of Hermanus Varsity. It was during the time of the worst of the riots when four of us, Angie, William, Fiki and I went to see our old friend Prof John de Gruchy at his home at Volmoed.

It took no time for John to get fired up about a tertiary institution here in Hermanus so that our young people could have the opportunity to study locally and make everything much more affordable.

John jumped into the deepest end and now, two and a half years later, Hermanus Varsity is in full swing. We offer a full B-Ed Foundation Phase degree as well as a Diploma in Early Childhood Development. Distance learning, but with world-class tutors. Hands-on, here in Hermanus, with our first 27 eager and starry-eyed education students – next year double or treble that number for sure.

Personal development, life skills, coping tools, music and art... everything needed to prepare young educators for the extremely difficult task ahead.

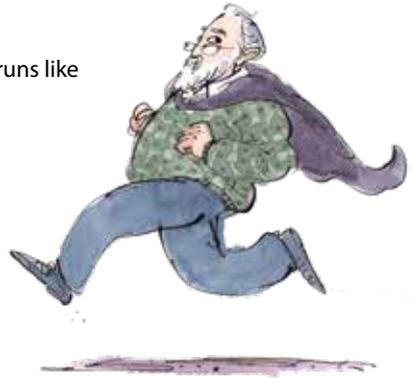
Training of such teachers has got to be one of the most important priorities for our country at present. And this is the only way of giving children a reasonable chance towards a better future. Dr Nicoline, recently retired, with nearly 40 years experience on the highest level at tertiary institutions heads all this up.

Our dream is to make Hermanus a destination of choice for Foundational Teachers Training but with so much more. Time and time again over the past ten years, I have seen a desperately poor young person break out of poverty by becoming a teacher and

earning a good salary.

Prof John is 82 years old this year and he says he runs like hell when he sees me coming.

Just imagine with me: 100 000, maybe 500 000, a million people from different backgrounds, who are privileged and have a little bit more than others – they each then decide, from the heart, to connect with a young person from any race, and not for any other reason than seeing VALUE in each other.



Steering these young people towards life skills and self-support. Imagine the worldwide impact of this happening for just ONE YEAR.

Hearts jumping over prejudices and suspicions. It's clear to see that politics and outward religion have failed us dismally. And we all have blind spots because of conditioning and our own short-sightedness. The bottom line is, we have got to get over ourselves and get along. Is there any point clinging onto patriotism and nationalism as lifesavers if it leads to nothing, fast? It's all just so fragile... Much better to find our identity in our oneness and seeing value in each other. This is so rewarding on top of it.

Never have we seen it more evident than with 'the great equaliser' – one person catches a virus in China and a few months later the entire globe is paralysed. We all stand equally vulnerable before this thing, totally interconnected. The only way forward now is for good people to just get on with it and go beyond all that separates us and find plenty of reasons to connect around our common humanity. Goodness and kindness, respect and understanding. Critical mass... This will be the turning point. The world will sit up and again see us as a light for Africa.

I hope that with my failing ears and dimming eyes I still have a few more years to watch our students' lives unfold, and I hope that some of their dreams come true, that they would taste the goodness that I have tasted as someone born into privilege in this diverse but wonderful land called South Africa. I hope that they will never have to live in a corrugated shack ever again. And I hope that their children one day would also be able to say that they had good, meaningful, and privileged lives.

Every Sparklekid knows this one thing: They never have to repay anything they have received, but there is one requirement - Go and do the same. Find someone in need and do for them what was done for you. Let the Goodness continue...

Archbishop Tutu said one day, "I am not an eternal optimist, but I am addicted to hope." I am too, Arch, I am too... But enough of all the dreaming, philosophising and the endless babbling. Let us get to the real reason for this little book. Please open your hearts as you read about the lives of ten young people who we are so proud to call Sparklekids.

**Alu**



# LOVE AND BEAUTY

**“I could never believe that I could be loved or be lovable.  
I believed I could never be beautiful.”**

**T**hese were the words that struck me most when I spoke to Alu. When she started telling me her story, I understood why. Alungile stands only 1.45m tall. I will never forget the first time we met the tiny girl with the direct look in her eyes and the shy smile. She was born in the Eastern Cape, and both her parents were unemployed.

“My home life was so horrible because of the severe poverty and constant illness, it never stopped,” she said.

Alu’s parents separated and she had to move to Zwelihle township to live with her widowed older sister and baby, who reluctantly took her in. The three of them had to survive on R250 per month (about \$17). She had to look after her sister’s baby, wash dishes at a restaurant in town and attend school. I cannot for the life of me imagine how this little person managed to do all this and still pass every year at school and attain a university exemption. After Grade 12 in 2014, she was accepted at The University of the Western Cape for a BA degree in psychology.

As her parents were married according to the isiXhosa culture, and sometimes outside the legal system, documents such as divorce papers were very hard to come by – and these were needed for loan and bursary applications.

Alu persisted. In her own words, she squatted illegally for a whole year with Nelisa, one of our other Sparklekids, sharing everything from a single bed in a small room to food and toiletries. Nelisa was in the final year of her studies in geology. Had it not been for Nelisa, Alu could never have made it to the second year.

Throughout, we tried to help her along in any way we could. We introduced Alu to our friend Lou-Anne from Abagold. She was deeply touched by this girl and her story and she decided to take Alu on board together with some of our other Sparklekids.

Alu passed her second year with five distinctions!

Nelisa by now had qualified as a geologist and was no longer there to help. Poor old Alu had to move from one friend to another for the remainder of her studies. Nelisa couldn’t find a job as a geologist and with some help from Sparklekids went on to study for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education at The University of the Witwatersrand. There she shared with her sister, also a Sparklekid who studied chemical engineering.

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in psychology, Alu also studied for a Postgrad-

uate Certificate in Education at The University of the Western Cape. After completing this course, both she and Nelisa started job hunting for teaching posts. It was the wrong time of year, so as hard as they tried nothing came up.

Realising that staying at home and hoping for a miracle was just no good, they both volunteered to teach at Qhayiya Secondary School in Zwelihle without pay. Alu taught geography and life orientation, Nelisa physical science. Both were later appointed in permanent posts where they are still teaching today.

Alu is earning well and even managed to build a house in the township, and when I asked her why she wanted to study further towards a Master's in Educational Psychology, she said: "If only there was a person who could hear my cry."

She said that she wants to help other people and especially young girls: those who feel abandoned, neglected, suffering emotional and physical abuse, those who feel hopeless and crushed by poverty, as she herself did not too long ago.

She has enrolled at The University of Cape Town for her Honours in Educational Psychology. She has to find transport twice a week for the next two years to complete it, but knowing Alu as I do, she will do it and excel.

Her dream is to one day have her own practice as an educational psychologist. Helping people who are where she once was is drawing closer as the months go by.

Well done Alu, you are a true Sparklekid. Your words to me - that your time spent with Angie during your school years was the best times of your life - touched me deeply. We cannot begin to tell you how proud we are of you.

Oh, and by the way, we're so happy that your eyes opened to see that you are very loved and that you are truly beautiful!



**Elvia and Angie**



**Theo and Sindiwe**



**Dr Niells, Theo and Angie**

**Thandi**



# FROM A CRATE TO A CRUISE SHIP

**Thandi's story is one that will touch you deeply.**

**H**ad I not witnessed the events described below, I would have had a hard time believing that so much could happen in such a short time. She was born in 1993 in a rural village called Ngqeleni, about four hours drive from Mthatha. Her father kicked the family (mom and three kids) out and they all had to move in with her granny.

Thandi says the poverty and hardship were so severe that on cold winter mornings, they had to cover their feet in warm cow dung for a bit of warmth. They had no shoes and good food was a luxury.

Thandi had to drop out of school to look for a better future and ended up in Hermanus. This was where we found her, sitting on an orange crate selling curios to tourists at the Old Harbour Market, earning next to nothing for a long day's work.

There was just something about this tiny, cheerful, and feisty young girl that couldn't be ignored. My friend FC and I saw that she deserved better. The next day she started working at my friend's Driftwood Beauty Salon. Nearly all of our beauty therapist students started off at Driftwood and had gone on to study in Cape Town, and have since found good employment.

Under FC's guidance, Thandi quickly mastered the skills required of an excellent massage therapist and soon had regular clients who wouldn't settle for anyone else.

Rolf and Vita, filmmakers who had lived in many places around the world, befriended her. Rolf was in the early stages of Parkinson's disease and he insisted that Thandi was the best masseuse who ever laid hands on him. She brought great comfort to him as his illness progressed.

They then decided, along with Sparklekids, to make it possible for her to study at one of the best beauty academies in Cape Town and obtain an ITEC certificate so that she would be able to work anywhere in the world.

And so Thandi, still a naïve young woman from the Eastern Cape, left for her year of study in Cape Town.

It wasn't easy going for poor Thandi. "Ai, Uncle Theo," she told me, "I thought Swedish massage was Sandwich massage!" She suffered verbal and even physical abuse from

fellow students, and she was terrified by subjects such as human anatomy. She often ended up crying in the bathroom. Her only friend there, a girl called Pinky, encouraged her to stay focused and not to give up.

Then came graduation day at the end of the year. Thandi achieved 98% – the best in the long history of Cape Beauty Academy. “There I discovered that I was not stupid, that I was someone.”

And then came another big opportunity. Steiner One Spa World International, recruiting therapists for luxury cruise liners selected her for three months’ further training. This was hugely expensive, but we made lots of plans. Swimming lessons and a very stringent and expensive medical examination were required as part of this course.

The first one was not too much of a problem, but when it came to the medical examination... oh dear.

Thandi with typical honesty told Dr Kuchali, who examined her that she suffers from motion sickness and that she has a ganglion cyst on her hand.

Now, for a massage therapist wanting to work at sea on a cruise liner, and using her hands to massage, left the doctor with no choice but to fail her. And you have only the one chance of passing, this was made clear from the outset.

Thandi was inconsolable. She cried all the way home from Cape Town in total despair having to face the fact that it was maybe the end of the road. We decided that this was a good time to start begging.



Dr Kuchali took my call and listened to my lamentation that this was neither a hobby nor a fantasy of a young girl to travel overseas. It was a lifeline out of dire poverty for an entire family.

He reluctantly relented, under the condition that we supply a report from an ear nose and throat specialist who had to examine Thandi’s ears for any trouble

that could occur onboard a ship for nine months at a time. And a report from an orthopaedic hand specialist, that the ganglion could be managed thereby enabling her to do her work uninterrupted.

We scurried all over to have this done, and this time she passed the medical. Soon the call-up instructions followed. Vaccinations, visas, registrations and countless other doc-

uments had to be arranged, and plane tickets had to be booked.

Imagine the fears that gripped Thandi and me on the day of departure. This girl who out of fear, up to that day had never used an escalator, now had to board a plane for JFK International in New York, 12 500km away.

From there, she had to find transport to New Jersey to board the ship that she would call home for the next nine months.

Having scraped together (scraped is a good word) what we thought would be enough money to see her through to the ship, we said our brave goodbyes.

Watching this young girl go through the boarding gate at Cape Town International Airport carrying an old suitcase was somewhat surreal, to say the least.



Three days later the WhatsApp message came. "Uncle Theo, I made it, I'm here, I'm safe!"

Thandi has completed three stints on exotic vessels with names such as Anthem of the Seas and Liberty of the Seas, cruising around the Caribbean. She has visited places like Cozumel, Abu Dhabi, Boston, Miami, San Juan, Nassau and many more that people can only dream of seeing.

Rolf has since died. I have such lovely photos of the last goodbye between Thandi and Rolf on his deathbed. These are images that have left deep and lasting impressions on me and it makes life so worth living.

Vita said to me one day that the many travels, beautiful homes and award-winning films meant very little in Rolf's final days. The difference that he had made in Thandi's life was one of the few things that really mattered in the end.

Our friend Rolf died a content man.

When Thandi and I hug each other, she holds on a little bit longer.

From a crate to a cruise ship and the crazy journey in between.

**Siseko**



# FAR MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

**I still see before my eyes the chubby little boy of 12 or 13, always standing in the first row of the school assembly which I was part of every Monday morning for seven years, hoping to inspire and motivate.**

Some of the things that I would say repeatedly were “You are much more than meets the eye”; or “You had no say in where you were born in life, but you have every say as to where you end up in life”; or “Inside of you is a resource far greater than the situation you were born into. Discover this – it’s your passport out of poverty, for sure.”

These words would get quoted back to me from time to time, even many years later when we speak to old friends. Once a Sparklekid, it seems like always a Sparklekid.

Anyway, the chubby, shy boy would always catch my eye, then giggle behind his hand and look away. His name is Siseko.

We built a friendship over many years and over many trips to Cape Town in the hard work of registering for universities, finding accommodation, and waiting in endless queues.

Often while travelling I would say to him, “Siseko, you are like a radio, talk talk talk. Please... Where’s the pause button?” He would laugh from the heart, be quiet for a few seconds, and then start again. He just couldn’t help it.

Siseko was born in an area called Centane, about two hours’ drive from Butterworth in the Eastern Cape. The family was so poor that they even lied about his year of birth to qualify for the child grant for a little bit longer.

As a small boy he and his sister, Bongzi, were sent to Hermanus to try and find a better life. They ended up living with their uncle, a good man, who would give up his own bed for years, sleeping on a couch so that Siseko and Bongzi could have a place to sleep.

The trouble started when their beloved mother Bulelwa, died suddenly in 2005, and on top of that, they discovered a cancerous growth on Siseko. He spent months in Frere Hospital fearing for his life, all alone, with only his thoughts and fears, this little boy.

After many months, successful surgery, and other treatment, he was discharged. Siseko would tell me about that time: “Looking in the mirror, I was so traumatised every time, I was losing more and more of myself every day. It would haunt me for years.”

This is where the mental illness started. It became a constant companion. Anxiety and depression caused him to drop out of Grade 12 and he had to go back the next year to try again. This time Siseko made it. Passing with university exemption allowed him to enrol at The University of the Western Cape to follow his dream of becoming a lawyer.

During his second year, the trouble started again.

So often students from very poor backgrounds have to do strange things to survive, such as selling drugs and even worse. This sensitive boy found himself surrounded by this, carrying the burden of his roommates' secret activities. Being associated with it would have been just too awful.

It pushed him over the edge and he dropped out of studying once again. On top of this, his best friend from childhood and a fellow Sparklekid, Mbongeni, a lovely gentle boy, was stabbed to death in Cape Town one evening by a drunken person.

More trouble followed when his uncle's house, the only home Siseko knew, was torched during the riots in Hermanus in 2018, just because his uncle was a municipal employee.

In a weak physical and mental state, Siseko was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, St Dominic's in the Eastern Cape where he spent nearly a year. There he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and put on medication for that, and for the first time, it brought his illness under control. This disease is a very heavy load to carry and escaping its tight and cruel tentacles is a near impossibility.

Well, Siseko is back at University this year.

The smiling and sensitive little boy has become a lovely young man who daily has to find a way to carry on, catching up on studies, living with the possibility of getting kicked out of residence, finding money to go on from day to day, not knowing when the dark cloud of depression will sneak up on him again.

But he has a dream of becoming a lawyer, and even if it takes him ten years, he will get there.

And yes, he is still chubby, and he still can not stop talking!



Lwando



# THE GREAT COMEBACK

**If ever there was a shy, soft-spoken young man, it is Lwando.**

**F**or those who know me, it is the greatest frustration of my life to try to hear people. I wear a hearing aid in both ears, but even so, I have to come up really close to hear what people say. Even this doesn't help much with Lwando.

Anyway, this is the story of a great comeback.

As a very shy young boy growing up in a little village in rural Eastern Cape, Lwando's job was to look after the animals. The cows and goats were his playmates, so when he came to Hermanus in 2011 to continue his schooling he could hardly speak a word of English.

Even while he was telling me the following story of an incident that happened a few years ago, sweat broke out on his serious face.

The day after he arrived in Hermanus, he had to make a speech in class. He was traumatised to say the least, and the next day was even worse. Standing up in front of his classmates, he started making his speech in a cold sweat.

Everyone started laughing and mocking him, and Lwando took the biggest confidence knock of his life. It made him even shyer and more withdrawn and he said he seriously thought of dropping out of school.

And then one day, all of this changed.

A teacher at Qhayiya School, Ms Spengane, saw there was something in this hurting, withdrawn boy. She gave him books to read, and spent time with him to wake up that something that she saw.

Another significant thing happened to Lwando. Two of our other Sparklekids, Asiphe and Onke became friends with him. They were both strong students and started encouraging him and helping him with extra lessons after hours at their homes, and their friendship became the most important thing in his life.

As Lwando said, "Asiphe and Onke changed my life. They saw something in me and they made an effort to look deeper. What Asiphe and Onke and teacher Vuyo did for me, no one else had done for me before – they believed in me."

Lwando passed with good grades in mathematics and physics. He enrolled for a B-Tech Nursing Science degree at Cape Peninsula University of Technology and graduated with flying colours, never failing a single subject, and has worked in hospitals such as Groot

Schuur, Tygerberg and Lentegeur.

Something stirred in him and he started moving closer and closer to what he discovered to be his passion: psychiatric nursing. Maybe more than some other nursing disciplines, doctors tend to value the opinion and experience of psychiatric nurses a bit more, because they work so closely, and spend so much time with the patients.

Lwando said, "This I love: to be valued. I am empowered because of my knowledge and people respect me because of this. I am good at what I do, and I do it from the heart."

What does the future hold for Lwando? He wants to go as far as he possibly can in psychiatric nursing, and he will soon begin with a Master's in Advanced Psychiatry – perhaps with a Ph.D. to follow.

Has he considered an academic career? "No, no, never. I am still shy, I want to much rather work hands-on."

Ms Spengane, the teacher who recognised his potential, is working towards her Ph.D. in the subject she loves, mathematics. Lots of other students were influenced by her.

Both Asiphe and Onke qualified as chemical engineers and they are working in that field.

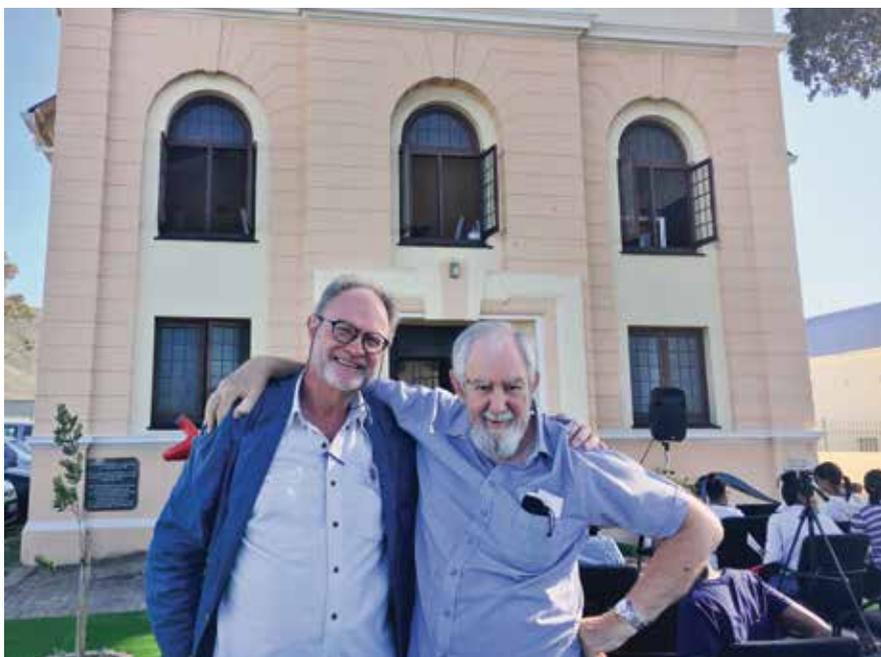
But I know that one day, when they look back on their lives, this one thing will stand out above all else for them... How they changed the life of a shy young boy from the Eastern Cape forever, through kindness, caring and friendship.



**Theo and Francois**



**Theo and Joké**



**Theo and Prof John**



# AN EXTREMELY HARD STORY TO TELL

**This is one of those stories that made me change my reason for writing this book from a casual approach to, for lack of a better description, touching on the sacred.**

**W**hen I asked half-jokingly, for her not to spare me the dirt, she answered, "I don't think you can handle the dirt", to which I answered, "Try me..." For obvious reasons she doesn't want her identity to be known, but she said that she really wanted her story to be told. We changed a few of the facts slightly to spare unnecessary hurt.

In her own words:

*My dad died when I was seven. This was also the time that the raping started... It lasted until I was eleven. This man was later slaughtered to death.*

*My Mom had to leave me with my granny and three drunkard uncles. She came to Hermanus to look for a better life for us all. The uncles kicked me and my two brothers out and so my mom had to fetch us to come and live with her.*

*On the 15th of June 2016, my Mom sent me to buy electricity, and out of nowhere, a man with a knife came up from behind and forced me to an abandoned building, and there I was raped again.*

*My life spun out of control, I felt so dirty, shameful and violated.*

*I fell pregnant when I was 15. My boy is now nine.*

*People ask me why I act all the time, why I am such a loudmouth.*

*Little do they know, I cover things up, I have to.*

*The sense of abandonment.*

*And this question that haunts me all the time.*

*Why did my father have to die?*

*Had he been alive, none of these horrible things would have happened.*

*I was blessed with a good brain, and with the help of wonderful people along the way.*

*I managed to end up studying medicine at one of the best universities in South Africa.*

*I study this because I want to heal, maybe even heal myself from the scars inside.*

*I need to have a voice, to feel empowered, not to be at the mercy of circumstances.*

It took me quite a while to process everything that this girl told me that day in Sparkle House where we had our long talk. How do I choose which parts of this story I put in, which do I leave out? I wanted to honour her total trust in me without shying away from the truth.

How do I in a few short paragraphs, capture all the heartache and pain of this person who transcended it all to become a recipient of the top 15% awards of her University, as well as other accolades that leave me standing in awe?

But what touched me most of all was when I asked her, as I asked each one of the ten Sparklekids that I chose for this book, who the most important person in their life was. Her answer, without thinking, "You are, Uncle Theo."

This leaves me with such mixed emotions - the position of importance that so many of the young people put on me but at the same time the sacred responsibility that I am often all they have. For better or for worse.

The following poems were written by her. The last one was for a friend who had to face the day-to-day cruelty of people.

### SCARRED FOR LIFE

I think back to when it happened  
When my world crashed down and all I could do was watch  
When full streets quickly emptied  
and became quiet for me to hear  
every step he made towards me  
When fear overwhelmed me and shuttered my voice  
I can still feel your grip on my wrists  
I still feel your body pressure against my cold traumatised body  
I can smell your disgusting cologne like you just sprayed it  
I can still hear your groaning and moaning as you enjoyed me  
While I broke down  
Your breath still cripples me... right now I am limp  
Twenty minutes felt like eternity  
As you were clinging to my sanity

I remember Fighting, Yelling and Screaming louder but nobody came to  
my rescue, nobody came to set me free  
It's funny how I in asking for forgiveness gave you more power to continue  
brutalising my pure body  
My heart was torn into two and it kept me pinned  
It's crazy how I wanted to be intimate with men hoping I get a flashback,  
all I want is a vivid picture of your face.  
Because I want to know who I'm killing

I see you in the shadows, I close my eyes and pray you are gone but I  
can still feel you  
I dream of running away but you are in my head  
My brittle body still vibrates from the thought of you  
My clothes are still soaked

trembling with the sound of my frozen voice

Physically you overpowered me but emotionally you are still destroying  
every little molecule of happiness

Tell me should I break down or break through?

I am tired of hiding behind this smile and these curtains

Everyone's happiness has become my priority but only because I am broken  
and I don't want to see broken people

You stole my purity my innocence and stored anger and vengeance in me

I refuse to give in

I am nothing like you

I don't break people

I build people

I don't steal happiness with my scarred torn heart

Yet I am scarred for life

But today I let you out of my mind.

### **LET IT RAIN**

I shall gaze at the clouds as they turn dark,  
forming nothing but smaller particles of water

The Spirit of cleansing will be formed and I will

allow it to overpower me

I will kneel down and look up to the skies and rejoice

as I will turn over a new leaf

I will watch as it strips away the heavy yoke of life

off my back

and again I will live

I shall let it rain and wash away all my flaws

Happily, I will romance myself with each drop

as it cleanses all the sorrows of life

Tears will drop but no man shall notice

as I will be covered with rain

I will watch joyfully in pain for change is pain but needed

I will shout "rain" out loud and endorse the beauty of its work

I shall not whip nor wonder why suddenly there is a change in my life

I will embrace every little wash because it will be symbolising a transformation  
of greatness

I will moult into a shiny chrysalis, caterpillar, I am, but emerging as  
a butterfly

I will fly up into the sky at the end of the rain

and the world will know a rejuvenated me

Let it rain

for a precious me will be born

## THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK

Days have passed and he has  
reconciled with the past  
In the sunrise he prays for the sunset  
As the daylight disappears he rejoices  
as it fades away with his shadow  
He un.masks himself and welcomes his true self  
He draws his eyebrows believing  
he sees clearly  
He adds makeup knowing only he  
can love who he is  
He looks at himself in the mirror and says  
"ooh darling the night is the time of no judgement"  
He embraces his feminine side  
and hits the road listening as the birds sing for him  
Soft is his heart at night, beautiful is his smile  
as the daylight has never seen it  
A beautiful woman is trapped inside  
a man's body  
He's been labelled as an abomination  
A creature that deserves to be stoned to death  
A possessed soul that needs deliverance

From what exactly?  
Himself?  
Can you not see the pain in his eyes?  
Can you not hear him scream  
for acceptance?  
Can you not feel his heart race from fear?  
Can you not taste his desire for love?  
Can you not smell his stinking breath  
because he's never spoken clean of himself?  
For how long will you cage him  
and deny him happiness?  
Depressed and dead is the man behind that mask  
It's in the sunset he's worn his mask  
Back to black suits and heavy Bibles  
Back to quoting the abomination he's  
claimed to be  
He's mastered the art of pretence  
The king of acting is back on the stage  
and the audience awaits a scene  
  
That's how he takes his day  
an art piece



Zubenathi



# KINDNESS ABOVE ALL

## **Complicated lives, causing complicated problems, asking for extreme solutions.**

Sometimes when a Sparklekid tells me about things that happened during their studies, I have to first sit down for a while and process before I dare open my mouth.

When Zubenathi and I sat down at The Eatery a while back and he had this half-smile on his face saying that he has something to show me, I had to take note.

Out came his very first business card: *Zubenathi Sofuthe, LLB, Candidate Attorney* – at one of the oldest and largest law firms in Hermanus, Guthrie and Theron. So proud, so proud!

We started reminiscing about his journey.

Early in 2018, during his second year at The University of the Western Cape, his grandmother died. The family shares a small home in Kwasa Kwasa, and his granny had been the family anchor. Things soon spun out of control and the loss was more than Zubenathi's mother could bear.

"Something broke inside her," he said. "She was overwhelmed by anxiety, fear and depression and she became very ill. She seriously needed medical and even psychiatric help. I had to step in and help take responsibility for the home and at the same time continue my studies. Poverty sat in the background all the time, and with my mom's illness on top of that, it became too much to handle at times."

Zubenathi said he often faked illness so that he could get sick notes from doctors to avoid writing tests and exams because he had too much to deal with at home.

He said he'd never forget the day when he had an important oral exam in Public International Law. Two female professors sat across from him and they got the exam underway. "Suddenly, I couldn't go on. I just sat silently for a full minute, then I started crying."

Both these ladies could see that this was serious, asked what was wrong, got up and started comforting him. At that moment warm humanity took over from cold professionalism, they helped him regain his composure, the exam could carry on, and he passed.

The business card that I have next to me as I write this, Zubenathi Sofuthe, LLB, stands for so much more than what meets the eye. It stands for perseverance, it stands for having had to dig deep, it stands for professional people who chose compassion over hard-and-fast rules, it stands for loving a very ill mother. It stands for the only passport out of poverty.

Zubenathi's dream is to study for his master's at either UCT or Wits as soon as money becomes available. At present, he is doing his utmost to help Sparklekids get all the documents in place that will allow us to import nearly 200 desperately needed secondhand laptops donated from Gothenburg in Sweden.

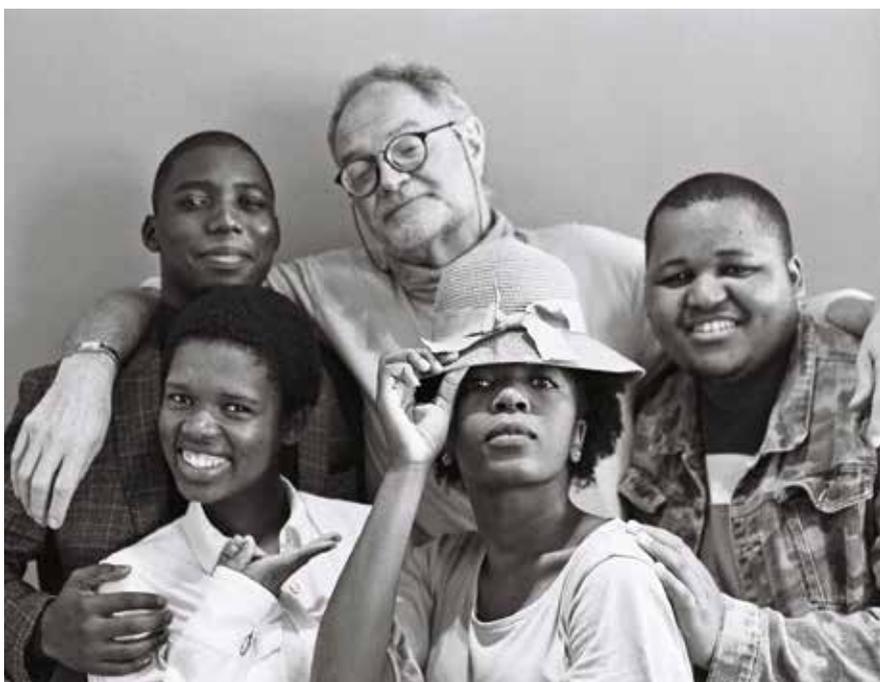
A smart guy with a beautiful heart is our Zubenathi – LLB!



**Wilco and Geesje**



**Thandi, Angie, Nyasha and Alu**



**Theo and some of the Sparklekids**

**Nyasha**



# HEALING HANDS

**Let me share with you something that I have seen over and over again.**

**W**hen you are wired for something, and you put your heart into that something, and you show up, again and again, that life will probably work out for you. The next story proves just that.

What does one do when a tiny slip of a girl tugs at your pants and with big dark eyes looks up at you and says: "I know you help children. Please help me."

This happened in 2014. The girl was Nyasha and there was an immediate warm connection between us.

She was born in 1998 in a town called Marondera, in rural Zimbabwe. Her mother fell on hard times and Nyasha was sent to live with her grandmother. The single emotion that sums up her childhood years was... abandonment.

There was a hardness in her eyes when she said, "My father never bothered with me, not even once. He lived close by, had another family. My half-brother was with me in one class. Not even once..."

When she was 14, she was sent to South Africa with the hope of a better life. Her only option was to enrol in an isiXhosa speaking school, and because she did not speak the language, she had to repeat Grade 7.

But she was clever and determined and studied well and passed her Grade 12 with university exemption. Because of her refugee status in our country options were very limited, and as she was unsure of what to study, we decided together that it would be best for her to take a gap year.

She grew into a beautiful young woman, and we thought that maybe she has what it takes, the look of Africa, to earn some money as a model. She had a very nice portfolio, and we made many trips to Cape Town, walking from one modelling agency to the next. Air hostess was another possibility and we applied at many airlines, local and international that had offices in Cape Town. It was really a hard time for her.

In the meantime, we managed to find her a job in the hospitality industry and she excelled in it, working long hours and impressing her customers with her warmth, good looks, and attentiveness.

She realised that she was cut out to work with people, and that the beauty industry would fit her like a glove. But this is a very expensive field of study, and very competitive.

Some broken promises and many sacrifices and disappointments later, she enrolled at one of the leading beauty academies in Cape Town.

She qualified during the early peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Classes were postponed and exams were delayed, but she managed to pass and earned an ITEC diploma in beauty therapy.

At this point, the story unfolds from one good thing to the next.

Nyasha discovered that she has 'healing hands.'

People were drawn to her, and a friend of ours, Shelby, took her under her wing, organised raffles, bought a mobile massage bed, lots of towels, oils and whatever was needed to set her up as a massage therapist.

People started coming and they all confirmed the 'healing hands.'

By a miracle, Nyasha then got introduced to a man named Christian Pinkerton, an internationally renowned massage therapist, and he started spending lots of time with her and teaching her the finer nuances of their trade.

Very soon after that Nyasha received an email from The Wine Glass, a restaurant where she had worked during her gap year. A lady from Germany had sent a mail looking for a girl – "Natasha or somebody" – who served her family a few years earlier. They were so impressed with her that they wanted to make contact with her. This could only have been Nyasha.

The connection was made and the lady from Germany, Sabine, said that she had Nyasha in her heart and wanted to invest in her future in whatever way she possibly could. Sabine is a business developer. They talked every day thereafter, and at the time of this writing, everything is on track for Nyasha to become self-supporting through her own little business.

Don't let anyone tell you that when you are wired for something, and when you put your heart into it, give the best of yourself, and just keep on showing up, that life will not work out for you.

I have seen this just too many times to be convinced otherwise.



**Nyasha in her modelling days**



**Theo and some more of the Sparklekids**

**Bonke**



# A RAT RACE WITH A DIFFERENCE

**Sometimes when one of my Sparklekids tells me a story, it is hard to know whether I should laugh or cry. A few days ago one of our students, Bonke, told me just such a story.**

Imagine the setting: A one-room corrugated shack in the worst part of the township. Bonke said when he lay down on his mattress, he could see aeroplanes pass overhead through the holes in the rusted roof.

Anchoring on one side was an industrial workshop, with grinders and other power tools on the go most of the day and well into the night. On the other side was a church, with preaching and the loudest music blaring through huge bass-bin speakers to attract congregants. When the noise stopped, the pastor could be heard having hushed conversations with secret girlfriends.

Weed smoke drifted incessantly into Bonke's room.

One day, after much plucking up of courage, Bonke invited a girl he really liked to visit him in his room. He swept and dusted and tried to make his humble home as presentable as possible. They were talking so nicely, Bonke says, and he felt he was making great progress in impressing this girl.

Just then two rats had a difference of opinion on an open rafter and one hell of a fight broke out. War cries echoed through the tiny room, fur flew and when one finally got the upper hand, the other dropped out of the sky and landed next to the poor girl with a plomp, scrambling to get away. Let us just say it spoilt the mood and the girl left in a hurry... One wonders why!

Bonke and I have had a long friendship. I still remember the day we met. This tall, extremely polite young man flagged my car down in a busy street and after a short introduction, told me he had received his Grade 12 results. They were not so hot. Even though it was a pass it fell short of the requirements of his dream of becoming an educator. My advice was that he should repeat the grade and improve his marks.

Old Bonke did this, achieving a very good pass and so was accepted by The University of the Western Cape.

I remember standing in a very long queue on registration day among hundreds of students, and a lady called Karin Naidoo making eye contact with me. She went on to show

us all the correct procedures and we registered in no time.

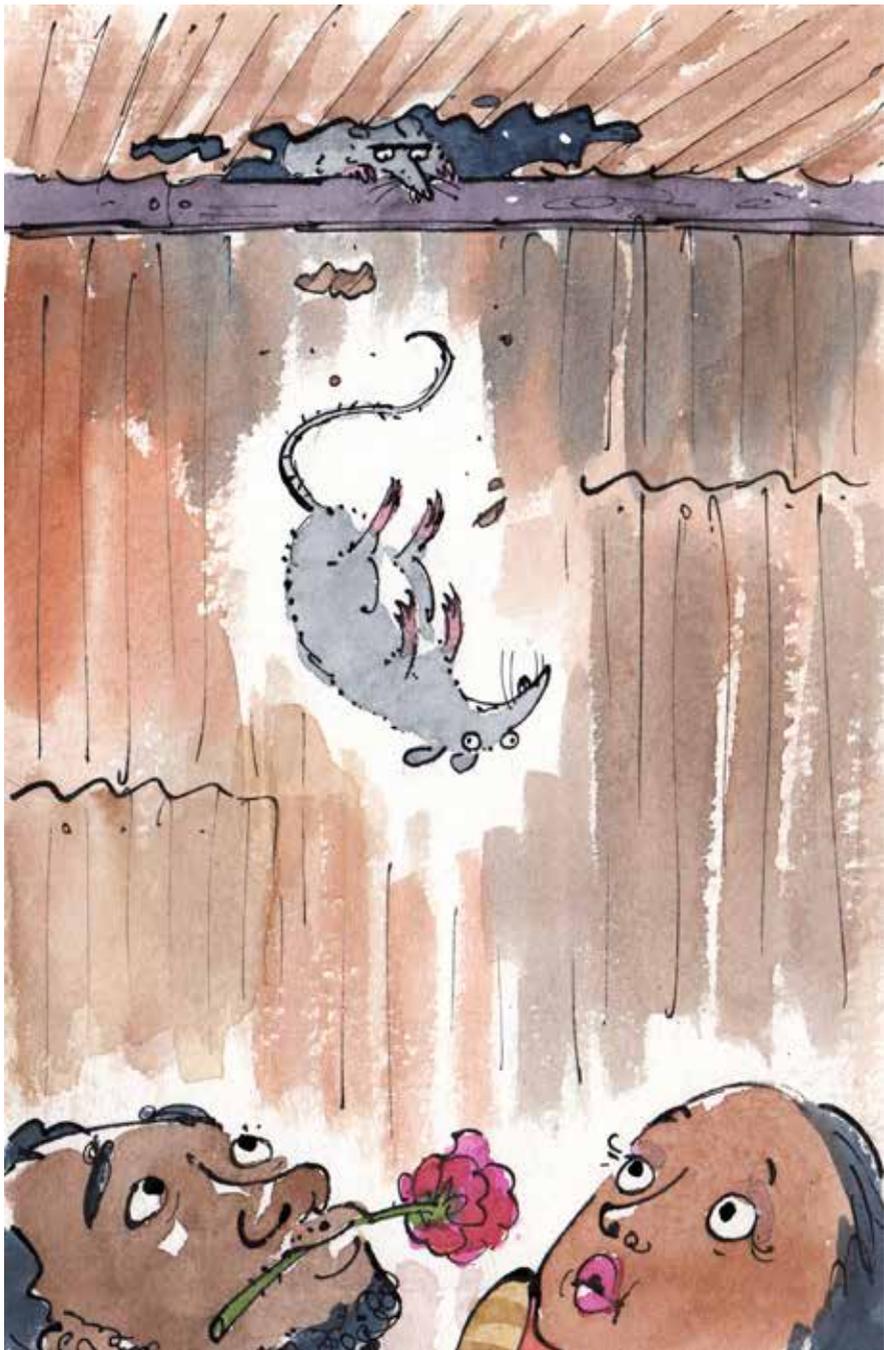
We introduced Bonke to the Lyle family who took a great liking to him and they have been a part of his journey over all these years.

Four years later Bonke completed a BA degree, majoring in IsiXhosa and geography. Next came his Honours in socio linguistics and media studies. He is currently doing his Master's and if all goes well, Covid and funds permitting, his Ph.D in the subject he loves most, the isiXhosa language and culture.

He is being used by the university to tutor and mentor junior students but will have to find a reasonable-paying teaching job soon to allow him to complete his studies.

Bonke is living proof that a humble heart, hard work, a sense of humour, character and lots of faith will always make a way for you.

He is such a nice and open-hearted person to know, and I will watch carefully to see how his life unfolds towards great things... Providing a rat does not interfere.



**Aviwe**



# LITTLE DID I KNOW

**How often have these words come back to haunt me over the years with the Sparklekids? If only I knew, I would have handled the situation so much better.**

**N**ot so long ago I asked one of our students, Aviwe, to meet me in Cape Town where she studies, to explain to me why she had failed a module in business computer applications.

It is my job to be accountable with the funding from our donors - so I can be quite, shall I say, less than my usual, jovial self when I have to deal with these situations.

We sent Aviwe taxi money and she had to make her way to Cape Town central to meet me at an appointed time. As she travelled, I received message after message on her progress. Waiting for taxis to fill up before moving, jumping from taxi to taxi, she eventually arrived a few minutes late, out of breath, eager to make a good impression.

Aviwe then told me that she failed the module because she was robbed a few months earlier, and begged me not to cut her off from Sparklekids. "It would break my heart," she said. I did my usual stern Uncle Theo thing with a frown, and after a few minutes told her that we will not cut her off. But next time...

Afterwards, in the car on our way to dropping Aviwe at the taxi rank, there was an animated conversation between her and another one of our students, but it was in isiXhosa so I understood nothing.

After dropping her off, I asked the other student what that was all about and she asked me if Aviwe had told me about the robbery. I said yes, she had, but only briefly. She then started to tell me, and I messaged Aviwe to confirm this story.

Her own words, unedited, minus the many emoticons of broken hearts and crying faces: "So last year after we were told to vacate from res because of this pandemic, I went home to the location in Lower Crossroads in Marikana, some informal settlement away from Cape Town. My Mom lost her job so we were forced to move there.

In April we got robbed, they broke into our shack, took my laptop, all of our clothes, everyone's phones, kettle, iron, everything. After the robbery, they wanted money and we told them we don't have any. One said to the other he should shoot Lunje, my nephew, a seven-month-old baby to prove that they are not joking. Tyooo uncle T, I've never been so shocked and scared like that day in my life.

The one who was instructed to shoot the baby beat the baby with the gun in the head, but thank God there is no permanent damage. So in May I applied for another laptop at



school because I lost all my work and study material, I was soooo far behind in my school work, with all my notes in my cell phone and not having a laptop. I get sooo emotional whenever I recall the events of that day. It was one horrible day of my life that I will never forget.”

I have been to Lower Crossroads a few times now, it is a god-forsaken area where the poorest of the poor and destitute find a corrugated roof over their heads.

The life of a young person from an underprivileged background, to get to school every day from a shack far away, where there is no running water, terrible ablutions, irregular transport, terrible violence and lack of money is one of mind-blowing hardship, as well as tenacity and perseverance.

Only a week before writing this, Aviwe was robbed of her phone again and we had to make plans to buy a new one. But this is the thing that humbles me:

Every time I speak to Aviwe, she is upbeat and hopeful that the qualification that she is studying towards will be her and her family’s passport out of poverty. She holds on tightly to this as a thin ray of light on her way towards a better future.

Sparklekids helped her to start a little soap business to help her pay for some very necessary things.

With the little pink car pulling the trailer, I have to fetch the eighty 5-litre plastic bottles of soap from Lower Crossroads and bring them to the customers in Hermanus. Overloading of the worst kind. But it’s part of the job.

Aviwe has been given a beautiful new smile recently when Dr. Claude performed cosmetic magic on her teeth, and as she says, “he has given me my smile back.” She is so grateful.

But at the end of it all, I am trying to say that the question: “why did you fail that module?” is just too simple.

Little do we know.



**Mary-Anne and Thandi**



**Dennis with two Sparklekids**



**Archbishop Tutu and Theo**

**Unathi**



**Tinashe**



# TWO VERY DIFFERENT PEAS IN ONE POD

**The following two stories illustrate how people with very different personalities enriched our lives over the years. I introduce you to Unathi and Tinashe.**

**U**nathi is quiet, shy, reserved and serious. She graduated from Nelson Mandela University in Gqeberha, a city about 700km from Hermanus, and is now a fully-fledged, card-carrying nursing sister with a B-Cur Hons degree behind her name. At the time of writing, she was just about to start her career at Port St John's Hospital.

Over the past five years, I got to know her during many trips to and from the bus stop in Caledon, a town 40km away, often at five in the morning or nine in the evening. The bus frequently ran two or more hours late, and a few times did not even pitch up at all. It was impossible for me to just drop a young girl with a big suitcase at a bus stop on a lonely stretch of road alone at night, where there's not even a bench to sit on. Only a single dim streetlight. So I always sat waiting with her. But in spending all this time together you get to know a person really well.

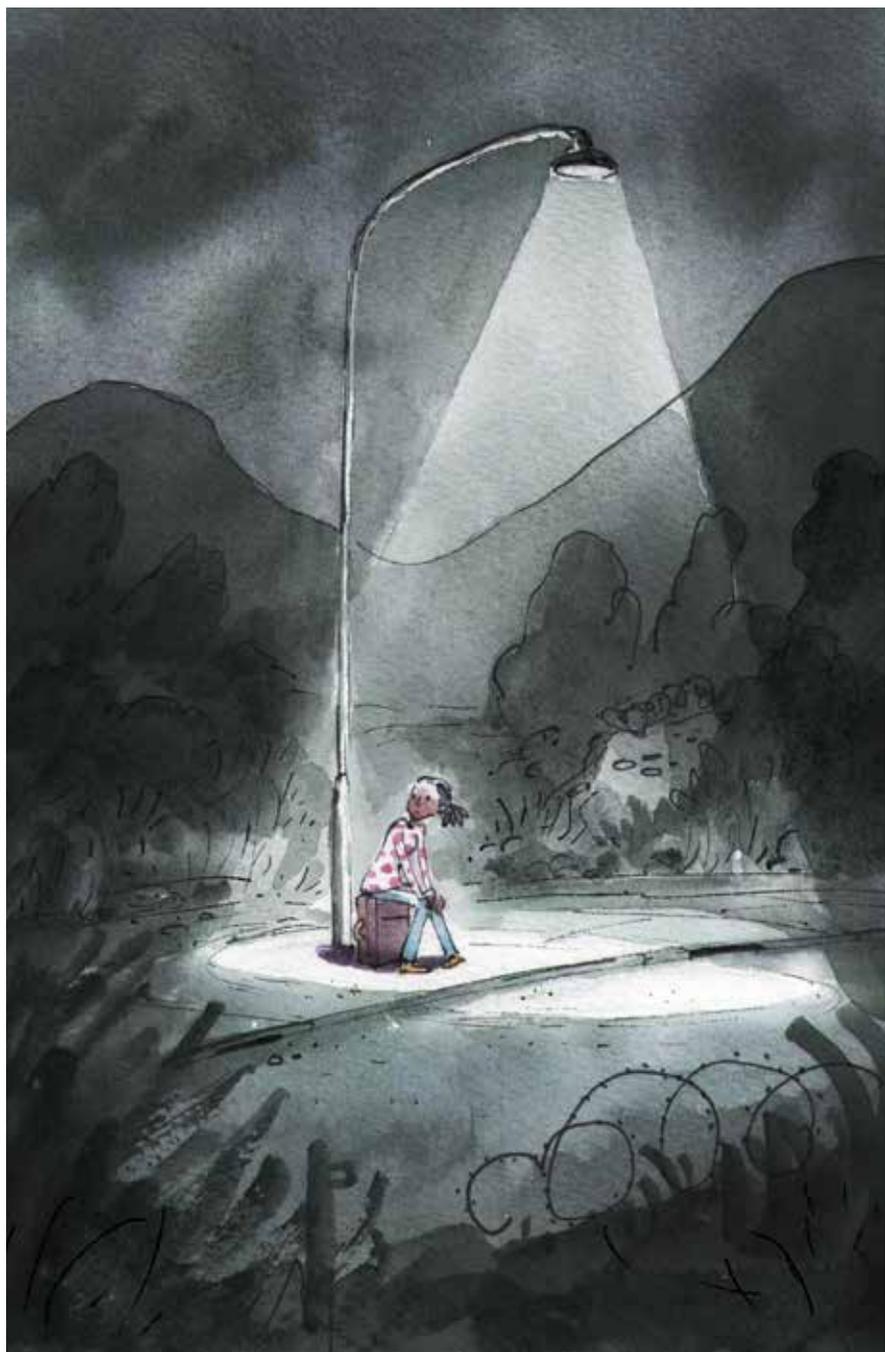
Unathi's father died when she was six, and her little sister died as a baby. Her brother was stabbed to death by a relative in 2009. This left only Unathi and her Mom.

Unathi fell pregnant during her final year of school. A big disaster, but she was determined not to let it put an end to her dream of becoming a nursing sister. So often during her studies, crises would strike back home. I remember one incident so well.

In Unathi's first year of studies, her mom, a cleaner at a shopping mall had to leave Unathi's baby in a neighbour's care. This person dropped the baby, who suffered a fractured skull and had to be rushed to Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town.

Distraught and anxious and 700km away, Unathi seriously considered dropping out of university. Imagine the turmoil in your heart when you have to write an important test, knowing your baby lies critically ill far away.

Encouragement and support kept her going and she miraculously passed her first year. In her second year, she managed to get five distinctions. Unathi says, "Please don't make my mistakes. Never, never, never fall pregnant before you've finished your studies and are able to support your child. It is not right for a baby to be born into poverty. She did not ask to be there. For a child to have a child... it's bad. I made a very hard life for myself. Don't make my mistakes."



She further says, "Poverty has always been a part of my life. As a nursing sister I am now out of it. But if I think how close I came to dropping out... Yhoo!" The last Whatsapp I got from her just before printing this book reads, "By the way, today I got my first salary, and I am so so so happy!!!!!"

Then there is Tinashe. She is confident, assertive, laughs often, talks a lot. In short, a delight to be with. She always leaves you feeling better about yourself. But her life was never easy. Her father died when she was four and her mom a few years later. She finished her secondary schooling in Zimbabwe, supported by her family. She then came to Hermanus to try to raise money to pursue her dream of becoming a medical doctor, and more specifically a gynaecologist.

We met Tinashe during that time and there was an instant bond between her and Angie. She spent a lot of time at our home and helped with everything, from looking after our animals to involving herself in many of Sparklekids' activities. A constant presence, annoying and then delighting with her incessant nattering.

We helped her to find her first job, but this did not work out well at all. Her life was made a misery with emotional abuse, she was under threat of deportation and she had to leave that situation in a hurry.

Her second job, with an amazing NGO called Just Care, was the exact opposite. It turned her life around. Jacquie and Kath liked her immediately and did everything in their power to help things along. Since she is from Zimbabwe there were no loans or bursaries available, but we all worked hard to try to raise funds towards giving her a start for her university education.

We were so thrilled when a well-to-do elderly lady with a passion for Tinashe's chosen field of study approached us, and after long deliberation, offered financial help towards University. Sadly, our hopes were dashed when the lady's family put a stop to this on the day the funds were supposed to be paid over into Tinashe's account.

I remember Tinashe having to comfort me instead of the other way around. "It's okay Uncle Theo, never mind, something else will come up," wiping away tears of disappointment. One must never break a promise to a young person.

I'm pleased to say that all worked out well for Tinashe in the end. She attended The University of the Western Cape and graduated with a BSc in Biomedical Science, and is now busy studying for her honours. The next step is to get into a medical faculty to further her studies so that she can become a gynaecologist, "Even if it takes 20 years", she says.

The love of her life is Tavadzwa, a brain box with a master's degree in software engineering. He is as quiet and reserved as she is expressive and excitable. They are renting a lovely apartment in Cape Town, and they just bought themselves a beautiful red Kia.

But God help poor Tavadzwa in the years ahead with this chatterbox woman!

# FINAL WORDS

*Disciples and devotees... What are most of them doing? Worshipping the teapot instead of drinking the tea!*



Dive in headfirst. Find something that makes you excited about your life, dear reader.

“You will be content. You will never be alone in your Spirit. And you will belong.”

In His light do we see light... We did.

I can in all honesty say that the sense of belonging and miracles happening whenever we needed them over the past ten years has never failed us, not even once!

Many of our Sparklekids have now graduated and are working as Engineers, Teachers, Nurses, Lawyers, Electricians, IT specialists, Therapists and more. Have a look at the Student List on our website to see who studied what and where over the past ten years. Some of them are forever out of poverty and forging for themselves lives that are so much better than what their circumstances dictated.

Ten years ago not too many young people from the Zwelihle community went on to tertiary studies.

There has since been a flood of young people going forward from there, and I honestly believe it is because of being inspired by so many Sparklekids.

Who knows, if there is interest enough in our little book and the stories we've told, we would pluck up the courage to write the tales of some more of our young people.

Therein maybe will be the story of one of our Sparklekids who had to work in the oldest and most soul-destroying profession for twelve years. She is now in the nursing profession.

She is a caring and warm-hearted person and excellent in her job, but the scars are so easy to see. Her name will never be mentioned. She is not the only one.

As I keep on having to remind myself: "Better to stand in awe of what people have had to carry... Rather than standing in judgement as to how they carry it."

If you were inspired by this little book and the life stories of some of our Sparklekids, and you want the goodness to spread so that we can do more of the same:

Then please pass this book on to others and please look out for the online pdf and tell as many people as you possibly can of it... and on and on and on!

Everything you need to know about us you will find under the 'Become Involved' tab under the menu on our website:

**[www.sparklekids.co.za](http://www.sparklekids.co.za)**

To read the book online, to find out more information, or even if you just want to drop us a line, email us on:

**[theo.sparklekids@gmail.com](mailto:theo.sparklekids@gmail.com)**

# THANK YOU

**Theo Jr: Illustrator** (Best in the world – his dad says so) – theodorekeyart@gmail.com

**Tinus: Copy Editor** (Trying hard to keep Theo on the page) – tinushorn@gmail.com

**Johann K: Photographs** (Pics as I know my Sparklekids) – jvrkruger@gmail.com

**Taylum: Layout** (So happy you're with us) – titanium.photog@gmail.com

**De Waal and Hedda:** The Village NEWS (Much more than a Newspaper)

**FC:** Friendship and sound-boarding support over years and years

**Gonggrijp Family:** What a journey, the things we've been through together

**Kim:** Who sent us to Bitchet Green

**Abagold Development Trust:** Stepped up time after time

**Dr John D:** Looking out for us medically

**Theo Irene:** Opened the door for us to see the opportunity

**Graeme Lahoud:** Always a phone call away

**Claudius and André:** Grateful for our house until the cows come home

**Lisa:** Always grateful... Sea Point

**Ad and Doro:** There to help

**Anne-Marie, Kay and Peta:** Beds for our students

**William, Fiki and Sonke:** Lots of friendship and fun

**Lourina and Marica:** Lawyers beyond the call of duty

**Ryno, Finglobal:** Stepped in to help

**Dr Hoepie, Psychiatrist:** The best

**Dr Toekie, Psychologist:** Coping tools

**Dr Petrus and Liesbet:** Soft landing

**Wendy, Education:** From day one

**Dr Suzie, Cardiologist:** From the heart

**Gariti:** So thankful

**Sr Cathrine:** Goodness

**Doris:** Kindness

**Sam:** Help and healing

**Larona:** Together in every way

**Lauren:** Never too much trouble

**Stephen and Hanlie:** Accountants who care

**Philip and Marcellé:** Maths and Ears

**Deon:** Green health and drumming

**Jozua:** Art from the heart from the start

**Billy, Wildlife:** Makes nature come alive

**Japie:** Old faithful

**Stefan and Yaël:** Best music ever

**Mr Morris T:** Wise old owl

**Qhayiya School:** Mr Lolwana and some of the wonderful teachers – They gave us a platform early on and that became Sparklekids

**Zweihle School:** Ms Mdoda, Thandeka, Nancy and Nicolene – Trusting us with their great school

I WANTED THIS BOOK TO BE A BIT ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES...  
AUTHENTIC WITH LOTS OF HEART, AND NOT PERFECT IN ANY WAY  
REGARDING DICTION AND PROSE...

(AS IF IT COULD... HELLO, IT'S THEO'S WRITING!)

