

Township schools learn to smile

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“LAUGHTER therapy” and “fun committees” are not phrases often associated with exhausted teachers, but a new programme aimed at boosting school leadership has township schools smiling again.

As a qualified architect, Rosie Chirongoma is drafting a new course in life – one that is building the foundation for functional, thriving schools that will nurture young lives.

Chirongoma has partnered with Johanna Ramodike, the principal of Siphethu Full Service Primary school in Daveyton, Ekurhuleni, to help equip her with vital skills to improve the learning environment. And more and more professionals are committing themselves.

Partners for Possibility (PfP) is a unique up-skilling model that connects school leaders with business leaders to equip them to lead change and mobilise communities around their school.

For Chirongoma, the benefit

has been returned twofold by Ramodike. “The model is one of co-action and co-learning where I created opportunities to improve Johanna’s leadership. And I have been so blessed by the experience.”

Chirongoma, 32, pulled in friends and fellow business leaders to form one-day workshops in anything from computer literacy to project planning in a bid to create team-building and a co-ordinated approach to best teaching practices.

Siphethu Full Service had a particular challenge trying to cater to special-needs children in addition to mainstream pupils.

Ramodike has nothing but praise for her new mentor. “The most important thing she taught me was just to relax. If you become emotional and reactive, you make blunders. I learnt to just chill.

“I read about Louise van Rhyn’s programme and it appealed to me. I offered to get involved, and after several months, I was offered the position as Gauteng facilitator. It has helped me in some way to change the cycle of poverty.”

Chirongoma’s change in career followed a sabbatical she took in 2009 and two years of working with Children of Fire. She felt drawn to helping children and decided to become more involved in philanthropic pursuits.

But the integration into school life wasn’t easy. She said she found the way to make an impression was just to “show up”. “Eventually, the kids and the teachers just started acknowledging me.

“My humanity became the delivery vehicle and I learnt to just pause at times and let the solution present itself

organically.”

Though the programme is set up as a one-year partnership, she has remained in close contact with 59-year-old Ramodike and continues to assist her whenever she can.

Chirongoma also learnt more about herself and how to influence people. “We needed to work with the school governing body so they could communicate better and understand the impact of their decisions.”

As the Gauteng facilitator for PfP, she helps connect business leaders and schools that need assistance. “Business leaders work from a place of anonymity, and at school no one knows who you are,” said Chirongoma.

The partners programme runs over one year, in which the leaders are tasked to spend a certain number of hours with the school head. It is a non-profit and internationally recognised leadership development initiative introduced by Symphonia, a collaborative organisation that links key role-players to induce change.

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