

A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
THE NKOSINATHI FOUNDATION: Breaking Barriers of Blindness  
By Hazel Smith Marshall

## INTRODUCTION

By dissecting and analysing the somewhat long and ponderous name of our organisation, the reader will fairly easily discover who we are, whose interests we serve, the principles that guide our actions and, possibly, why we exist today and why we have existed for the past 66 years. Our first 45 years were documented by J.C. Mostert in his history of the South African Blind Workers Organisation entitled “Droom Tot Daad”, (roughly translated title, “Dream into Action”) published in 1996 to mark the 50th anniversary of that organisation.

## LOCATION AND ASSETS

The Nkosinathi Foundation is a non-governmental organisation, registered as a nonprofit in terms of the Nonprofit Organisations Act and as a public benefit organisation in terms of the Income Tax Act. It is situated in a renovated house in North End, Port Elizabeth, which the Foundation bought for R200 000 cash derived mainly from a number of generous legacies, in 1998 after operating from a series of six different rented addresses. Each office was marginally better than the one before it, but all were completely inadequate for our purposes. All the Foundation's activities take place here or are managed from here. The assets include well-equipped individual offices, ample kitchen and bathroom facilities, a self-contained meeting room-cum-flatlet, a very well equipped classroom for our early childhood development programme, three motor vehicles and a large range of optical and other assistive devices for demonstration and training purposes. Items are lent to clients to try out at home or work for a week or two so that any decision to purchase their own will be well informed. This is absolutely essential, especially in the case of low vision equipment, if one is to benefit maximally from its use. We do not stock devices for sale because the Foundation simply does not have sufficient capital or staff capacity to do so. The Foundation's most important asset is its human capital, encompassing an exceptionally high level of skills, experience and commitment. This knowledge is neither isolated nor confined in-house but is constantly renewed and developed by close working relationships with ophthalmologists, optometrists, low vision practitioners and numerous other professionals in the NGO sector and in government departments such as Social Development, Health and Education. In the main, ongoing direct services are provided by staff members employed for this purpose although volunteers still make a valuable input. All staff members, except those who are full-time employees, work either mornings only or on a sessional basis.

The Foundation is governed by a democratically elected Board, the majority of its members being blind or partially sighted people. The term of office for all Board members is two years and office-bearers may not be elected or appointed in the same capacity for more than three consecutive terms. The Director is an ex officio Board member and has full voting rights except in decisions that will benefit her unfairly.

When tracing the growth of the Foundation, it is interesting to note that it has followed the recognised pattern of development of a healthy NGO, over time developing from a small consumer group of volunteers, founded in Port Elizabeth on 27 May 1948, into a major service provider with considerable consumer input. All day-to-day management matters have been removed from the agenda of the governing body and responsibility for the drafting and implementation of the annual year plan and budget (which are submitted to the Board for approval) now rests on the Director's shoulders.

The national organisation as such was established in Johannesburg on 26 October 1946 by a small group of visionary blind people, mainly ex-pupils of the School for the Blind, Worcester. Their sole purpose was to improve their socio-economic position by finding jobs in the open labour market. At that time the only prospect for the majority of school leavers was very lowly paid manual labour in sheltered workshops run along welfare lines. What seems to have irked them most was that while they, the skilled craftsmen, were producing quality goods, their unskilled sighted assistants and the administrative staff in the very same workshops received higher wages. Riding the tide of criticism and derision from the welfare establishment, they succeeded beyond all expectation. Firstly, they taught each other and then found countless relatively well paid jobs as telephone switchboard operators in mining, commerce and industry and the public service. Then, by supplying study bursaries and braille literature, they assisted many of their peers to obtain university degrees and become successful professionals in teaching, law, music, theology, computer science, social work, psychology and physiotherapy.

## CONSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

As has been stated, the Nkosinathi Foundation started out as a branch of the SABWO. As such it was accountable to the Head Committee and the Executive Committee of that organisation even though it was always responsible for its own management and funding. An important change occurred in 1999 when the Head Committee resolved that branches should register as separate nonprofit organisations. The Foundation consequently became a juristic person, was able to register its property in its own name, enter into contracts and become the sole employer of its own staff complement. Until then the Foundation's staff members found themselves in the invidious position of being managed and paid by the Foundation but regarded constitutionally as

employees of the national body. The serious repercussions of this situation related to membership of the SABWO pension fund took years to resolve.

One of the most important steps in the history of the Foundation was taken on 14 December 2006 when a special general meeting, convened for the purpose, resolved unanimously to disaffiliate from the national body and to apply for membership of the South African National Council for the Blind. After almost 60 years of loyal membership, this decision was not taken lightly. The move had in fact been formally approved by the Foundation's governing body in September 2005 and widely circulated to all members and to readers of its newsletters in the months that followed. What prompted us to take action when we did were:

- (a) the growing consensus that the Foundation was developing along completely different lines from any other branch; and
- (b) the fact that the Foundation was unable and unwilling to carry out some of the demands made on it by the national body, such as gathering personal details of all its working members and work-seekers for a national database, recruiting a volunteer to act as an employment placement officer in a specialised field that clearly requires the services of full-time professionals, carrying out needs surveys that seemed to have little purpose but did have the potential to anger members by raising false hopes, and raising funds for the national body.

Instructed by the special general meeting, the Chairman rewrote the Foundation's constitution to make provision for the change in status and to incorporate the clear delineation between governance and management matters; prepared the application for membership of the South African National Council for the Blind and oversaw the dispatch of notices to relevant outside authorities and structures. Membership of the South African National Council for the Blind was granted to the Foundation in its own right on 20 April 2007.

## ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOUNDATION'S SERVICES

The fundamental purpose or *raison d'être* is encapsulated in its single constitutional objective, which reads:

“2.1 The overall objective of the Foundation is to promote the interests of blind and partially sighted people in the Province of the Eastern Cape by:

- [a] Assisting such people to adopt strategies which counteract the detrimental effects of blindness or partial sight; and
- [b] raising awareness concerning the dignity and abilities of blind and partially sighted people.”

Because the Foundation responds to perceived needs in the design of its services and the mode of their delivery, it has been able to initiate a number of innovations in South Africa. These include the formalisation of skills development or independence training; the conceptualisation, implementation and development of fieldwork which includes the recruitment, training and deployment of fieldworkers from mainly rural communities in their own surroundings; and the development and establishment of a

model to ensure that preschool children receive education and the necessary skills to cope with deficits attributable to their blindness.

The first seeds were sown in the 1950's and 1960's by a remarkable blind couple, Louis and Lizzy Uys, who inspired many successors, including some of the present leadership. At a time when neither skills development nor orientation and mobility training had been conceptualised, when low vision practice and the use of technology had not yet been dreamed of and when social work intervention focused mainly on material support, they set about teaching newly blind people the skills of daily living and fostering a spirit of independence in all aspects of life. The work was entirely dependent on the meagre resources of the SABWO Eastern Cape Branch and whatever they and their fellow blind volunteers could contribute from their own pockets. This extended to providing lengthy periods of accommodation in their own homes to people from out of town who came for braille tuition, other skills training or medical care.

Even today, the principles underpinning the Foundation's philosophy and practice closely resemble not only what the founding members thought and taught but what they lived and breathed.

These principles or guidelines may be listed as follows:

- (a) We prefer adults to make the first contact with us themselves and not to work through third parties.
- (b) We try to respond expeditiously even if initially it is only to arrange an appointment for a later date.
- (c) Our response is based on the initial need expressed by the client. It is, however, sometimes necessary to modify this approach so that clients do not miss out on appropriate services because they are not aware that they exist.
- (d) The client must be a partner in the goal setting, which means that he must be adequately informed.
- (e) Not all blind or partially sighted people need or want independence training services and their views on the matter must be respected.
- (f) We issue canes to all clients who want them without demanding prior O. and M. training.
- (g) A clear distinction must be drawn between the client's needs attributable to his loss of vision and those arising from other causes.
- (h) All service programmes and interaction with individual clients and groups are properly planned, evaluated and recorded in writing.
- (i) No information concerning a client may be divulged to anyone without his prior consent.
- (j) To ensure the success and sustainability of any fieldworker project, both sighted and blind workers, who are often recruited from the ranks of unemployed people, must be compensated financially for their work.

The writer's own contribution to service delivery in the 1970's was the introduction of the principles of rehabilitation, which she had studied in the course of her physiotherapy training in London a few years earlier. It was noteworthy that, while

Departments of Health and health professionals in general provided a battery of services to assist patients with acquired physical disabilities to adjust to the demands of everyday life, the medical fraternity (and just about everyone else who chose to express an opinion) would advise people with inoperable blindness or partial sight to go away and “learn to live with it”. Many people went away and did precisely that, but many more found that being enabled to learn required appropriate teaching, coaching and, preferably, successful role models. Above all else, all such people required appropriate information to enable them to get on with the business of living in a society that is so heavily dependent on visual cues and the written word. Sadly, the situation remains little changed throughout South Africa.

The writer's proposals for a rehabilitation service, written in a braille notebook dated 1969, are as valid today as they were then. The first and main essential is that no one proposing to transfer skills can interact successfully with others unless he/she can manage himself/herself independently on a daily basis. Put simply, one cannot buy or sell if one cannot identify and handle money without assistance.

The appointment of the organisation's first social worker, Elizabeth Haus, in 1975 had the effect of increasing rather than diminishing the demands on the volunteers because at that time, and for many years to follow, social workers tended to consider the teaching of practical skills to be outside the scope of their professional duties and somewhat peripheral to their “real” work, which consisted of counseling and facilitating the provision of material support. This view persisted until the year 2000 when the Foundation took a conscious decision to train its social workers to teach daily living skills including basic orientation and mobility techniques. In time, this facilitated a more holistic approach, greatly benefiting the clients and enriching social work practice. But in the meantime, everything changed for the better when Mrs Debby Wakeford threw her lot in with the organisation in 1986. Even though she knew that the organisation did not have a vacant post at the time, that there was no money and not even the outline of a job description, she accepted the challenge of becoming involved because, like the rest of the local leadership, she believed that there was a true need to be met. At the outset, the writer taught her all she wanted to know and, together, they devised and developed the concept of skills development. This was soon taken up by the South African National Council for the Blind but the rest of SABWO showed little interest. Mrs Wakeford herself became a skills developer, participated in the first South African course for low vision practitioners, matured as a professional through self-study, and grew the Foundation's service programmes through innovation after innovation.

## SERVICE RECIPIENTS

The Foundation's clients include people of all ages from birth to the very elderly, coming from a large variety of backgrounds and living mainly in the western and southern parts of the Eastern Cape Province. Some have lost their vision recently while others have been blind or partially sighted for many years or since birth. The main practical difference is that, while those who have recently lost their vision have to adapt their existing skills, the others often have to learn new skills from scratch.

For example, there is a difference in the manner in which people from the two groups would be taught to fry an egg safely. A person who may have cooked breakfast for years would now have to learn to rely on hearing and touch while the other would have to be taught how to use the stove and the relevant utensils as well and, probably, how to crack an egg.

And, teaching braille to an illiterate blind person differs vastly from teaching braille to a blind person who was previously ink-print literate.

#### THE FOUNDATION'S INTEGRATED COMMUNITY BASED REHABILITATION PROGRAMME

The three essential components of this programme are: skills of daily living including braille tuition and orientation and mobility training, low vision assessment and training in the use of remaining vision which includes the use of optical devices and effective environmental management, and counselling including trauma debriefing. The purpose of debriefing is not to assist the client to forget the trauma, but to learn to think of it differently so that he will be ready to move on in life. Members of staff, who deal with such clients on a daily basis, sometimes need debriefing themselves and this is facilitated by the Foundation. It is important to note here that the Foundation's two focused projects, Rural Outreach and Early Childhood Development, are underpinned by the same three essential components.

#### SERVICE DELIVERY

The Foundation uses a five-fold strategy to provide rehabilitation services to individuals.

[a] The client visits the Nkosinathi Centre by appointment for the required number of sessions.

[b] Staff members visit the client by appointment at home or at work.

[c] The client stays in our residential facility for intensive training for a week or two. He is accompanied by a family member or friend, who participates in the training, not only as a support person but in order to ensure less likelihood of his being hindered in using his newly-found skills when he returns home and to assist him with any necessary orientation there.

[d] Staff members stay overnight in nearby towns when a number of clients require services.

[e] Fieldworkers, drawn from the local community, currently provide services in the Tsitsikamma, Loerie, Hankey and Patenzie, Addo, Paterson and Kirkwood areas and in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth.

In addition, over the years, numerous people have participated in our group activities in Port Elizabeth, Clarkson, Kenton-on-Sea and George. These activities include loss support groups for participants of any age, loss support groups especially for elderly people, peer support groups run by members themselves, a youth group, a parents support group, a social activities group, an informational and training group for patients referred to the Foundation by the Department of Health, a group for married couples with one of the partners being sighted and the other blind or partially sighted as well as our early childhood development programme for children from birth to

seven years, which includes a group of 4 to 7-year-olds once a week. Our popular children's holiday programme continues in the winter and Christmas school holidays, when informative and educational activities are combined with a great deal of fun and friendship. Over the past decades a number of blind and sighted volunteers have made a valuable contribution by providing pottery lessons, cookery classes, braille tuition, drumming, beading, spiritual support, training of the Nkosinathi Choir (which has subsequently become independent as an income generating venture) and transport.

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT

In-house training in the three core competencies of our service delivery takes place for all relevant staff members at least once a year. Courses are often open to members of other organisations as well. Because of our holistic approach, it is important to note that staff members are not confined to their traditional roles. Social workers teach skills of daily living while the Director may provide counseling when necessary. All employees, including administrative staff and office cleaners, are given basic training in such areas as the sighted guide technique and an acceptable manner of interacting with blind and partially sighted people, including respect for their dignity and privacy. Sister organisations are visited to become familiar with their services and members of staff are also encouraged and enabled to attend courses and conferences relevant to their respective job descriptions. At the invitation of optometrists and ophthalmologists, Mrs. Wakeford has spent many hours observing their work in their surgeries and operating theatres.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

Unearthing this information has proved to be quite an indulgence in nostalgia. Some notes reflect significant milestones while others are included to capture the attention of readers and take those, who were there, down memory lane.

1992

- \* Death of founder member, Mrs. Elizabeth [Lizzy] Uys.
- \* Establishment of low vision revolving loan fund with a donation of R6000 from the South African National Council for the Blind.
- \* First recorded statement that volunteers were finding it virtually impossible to do job placements in Port Elizabeth.

1993

- \* Chairman Rueben Puchert promotes our innovative skills development work countrywide.

1994

- \* Staff members attend a FAMSA “Dealing With Loss” workshop, which is to resonate throughout our work for years to come.

- \* Proliferation of government forums and consultations, which strains the Foundation's human resource capacity to participate in a meaningful way.

1995

- \* Foundation brings plight of blind and partially sighted out-of-school youngsters to the attention of the Department of Education.

- \* First recorded mention of the possible acquisition of a braille embosser for the Foundation.

1996

- \* First "Personal Enrichment Course", the imaginative precursor to many programmes for blind and partially sighted people.

1997

- \* High point of networking with many other organisations, those for people with intellectual or physical disabilities in particular, in formal structures such as the Federal Council on Disability, and on a one-to-one basis.

1998

- \* Purchase of property in North End, Port Elizabeth after a long and arduous search.

- \* Support for planned court action to ensure a secret ballot for blind voters in national, provincial and local government elections.

1999

- \* Official opening of the Nkosinathi Centre on 29 July by guest speaker, Dave Botha.

- \* Constitutional changes at national level, which were to have a profound effect on the Foundation in years to come.

2000

- \* The Foundation runs workshops with learners, teachers and support staff at the Khanyisa School at the request of the Department of Education with the purpose of dealing with the trauma caused by years of instability at the School.

- \* The Foundation presents its first residential course in independence skills training.

- \* Extensive and rewarding participation in BayWorld Museum's dramatic depiction of disability issues, entitled "Victory Over Adversity", most sensitively produced by Dave Voorvelt.

2001

- \* The Foundation becomes a separate legal entity by registering as a nonprofit organisation in its own right.

- \* Establishment of the Foundation's fieldworker project in the Tsitsikamma area, where local members of the community are recruited, trained and deployed to provide blindness-related services to hundreds of blind and partially sighted people previously unserved.

- \* First recorded mention of participation in "Open Door", the Kingfisher FM programme on disability.

2002

- \* First course in income generation, presented by the Foundation, is completed successfully.

- \* Establishment of the Disability Forum in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropole.

2003



- \* The annual general meeting adopts the name of Nkosingathi Foundation for Blind and Partially Sighted People on 17 May.

- \* At his own request, the Speaker of the Eastern Cape Provincial Legislature, Mr Mayathula, visits the Foundation on 2 October.

2004

- \* Peter Lee and JB and Regina Jakavula attend a Democracy Training workshop in East London.

2005

- \* Pastor Theo Snyman, a blind member of the Foundation, re-dedicates greatly upgraded premises during the annual general meeting on 31 May.

- \* A letter of congratulations on her 111th birthday from President and Mrs Mbeki is delivered by hand by the Director and the Chairman to the Foundation's oldest member, who lives in the Tsitsikamma area.

- \* Attendance of international low vision conference in London by Debby Wakeford and Lorna Brown, leads to several beneficial changes in the Foundation's service provision.

2006

- \* Establishment of successful food gardens project in the Tsitsikamma.

2007

- \* Increasing funding of the Foundation's services by its major sponsor, the John and Esther Ellerman Memorial Trust.

- \* Presentation of training workshops for blind and partially sighted people in Graaff-Reinet.

- \* Collaboration with private sector eye care professionals in the gratis provision of 100 cataract extractions.

- \* Marked improvement in co-operative undertakings with the eye care services of the Department of Health despite no funding being made available from that Department.

2008

- \* Successful income generation training in the Tsitsikamma Area resulting in the establishment of no fewer than 14 micro businesses.

- \* First Varsity College fun run in collaboration with Body Concept in which members of the Foundation participate and the Foundation itself becomes a financial beneficiary as well.

- \* The publication of a book of 60 recipes, devised by the well known blind chef, Peter Lee Ching, to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Foundation.

2009

- \* Michael Wakeford trains for several months and then participates in the Iron Man competition in Port Elizabeth on behalf of the Foundation.

- \* Gerda Hodges of Port Elizabeth mentions the Foundation in publicity for her 80 km walk along the Great Wall of China.

- \* Maria Grootboom retires after 7 years as fieldworker in the Tsitsikamma Area.

- \* Blind members have access to a secret ballot in the National and Provincial elections for the first time in South Africa.

\* Along with blind people worldwide, members mark the bicentenary of the birth of Louis Braille and the ratification by South Africa of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

## 2010

- \* The work having been outsourced, a long cherished dream is realised with the completion of an electronic database of all members.
- \* With financial support from the DG Murray Trust, the rather untidy backyard is transformed into a beautiful, restful garden.
- \* The old storeroom is transformed into a self-contained flatlet and becomes the classroom where Saffyre Smith commences a weekly class for little ones in our early childhood development programme, the emphasis being on counteracting deficits attributable to blindness.
- \* The Foundation introduces computer lessons with Lauren Jonas as trainer.
- \* Several members enjoy matches of the Soccer World Cup in the Nelson Mandela stadium where audio description is provided for the first time in South Africa.

## 2011

- \* Dr Lorna Brown, supported by Dr Blanche Pretorius of NMMU in her personal capacity, commences a research project into the losses within the loss of vision, the purpose being to enable the Foundation to renew or further develop its intervention strategies on the basis of research findings.
- \* The Foundation appoints its first fully qualified O&M practitioner, Queen Molefe.
- \* Awareness for the Foundation is raised by the Chevrolet Warriors and Protea cricketer, Johan Botha, by means of a 24-hour cycle ride in St. George's Park.

## 2012

- A constitution is written and accepted for a new organisation, Vision 21, an offshoot of the Nkosinathi Foundation aiming to assist members in their transition from school to tertiary education or into the world of work.
- \* The Foundation presents a successful awareness breakfast, sponsored by the Marine Hotel, primarily for ophthalmologists and optometrists with internationally recognised low vision specialist, Hazel Sacharowitz, as guest speaker.
  - \* The Foundation presents the first week long rehabilitation training workshop for Lilitha College ophthalmic nursing students.
  - \* The Medical Forum Theatre partners with the Foundation for the First 5K Walk to mark International White Cane Safety Day in October.

## 2013

- \* Due to financial constraints, the Foundation suffers the pain of retrenching three members of staff. Another three, Debby Wakeford, Lorna Brown and Barbara Fischer, demonstrate extraordinary loyalty and sacrifice towards the Foundation by foregoing their salaries for seven months before they are paid when the financial situation stabilises.
- \* The first blind fieldworker, Riet Peni, is appointed in the Sundays River Valley area where he provides outstanding service to blind and partially sighted members of his community.

2014

\* Board member Jenny Henderson spearheads a project to market and sell paintings by the late NF member Pat McGaffin for the benefit of the Foundation, many of the paintings having been painted from memory because of her deteriorating vision.

\* International White Cane Safety Day is marked by greatly increased participation and the addition of a 10K run.

#### MONEY MATTERS

Whenever I write that phrase, I am tempted to add “It certainly does!” and, for once, I will not resist the temptation. The Nkosinathi Foundation has never been wealthy, but in recent years our small reserves have been all but depleted by rising costs and dwindling income. There are just so many more players in the field, competing for a slice of the philanthropy cake. A legitimate question would be: why, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is it still acceptable to society at large that a section of itself consisting of blind and partially sighted people are expected to depend on charity for services that are vital to their well-being?

This question is seldom asked and never answered. We soldier on nevertheless because we believe in the cause we serve.

It is a far cry now from earlier times when our funding came from the proceeds of cake sales, raffles, talent concerts and the like. Alongside other nonprofit organisations we submit countless written proposals to corporates and other potential funders, gratefully write our progress reports when the proposals have been successful and steadfastly adhere to our policy of not inflating claims about our activities or about the amount of money needed to sustain them.

Full funding details appear in all the Foundation's annual reports. While every contribution is of the greatest importance to the Foundation, we record our major funders over the years as the John and Esther Ellerman Memorial Trust for the past 25 years, the Department of Social Development since 1975, the DG Murry Trust and the National Lotteries Distribution Fund and thank all again for helping us to stay afloat.

Time and time again we have witnessed the vital difference we are privileged to make in the lives of blind and partially sighted people. We ourselves are often surprised by the dramatic changes brought about by what may appear to be an insignificant intervention made at just the right time.