

city of angels

Armed with goodwill and personal power, there are women around South Africa quietly helping those in need. Without recognition or glory, they sacrifice their time to contribute to their communities. By Jo Lennox. Photographs: Dale Yudelman.

dianne case, 43, writer

Dianne has been a self-employed writer for 20 years, specialising in educational children's books and teenage novels. Through her literary work she became involved in teaching young offenders in Cape Town's Pollsmoor Prison. There, she discovered a need among mature women prisoners for communication and writing skills. Nine months ago, Dianne began a literacy programme to teach a group of women to read and write, offering them the means to express themselves on paper.

"I've always been actively involved in the community, and although I've never had any training as a social worker, I've always tried to help those less fortunate than myself. When I was asked to help educate the youth in Pollsmoor, I jumped at the chance. Not long afterwards, however, I realised that there was a greater need for the education of older female prisoners, who are often neglected.

"There are 260 female inmates in Pollsmoor. Their crimes vary from petty theft to murder. As far as I'm concerned, they've already been judged by the law and are paying their debt to society — they now need support and understanding, and that's what I want to give them. After receiving consent from the prison authorities, I started the programme, and now I visit a group of between 10 and 20 women every week.

"I have developed a good relationship with many of these women. We discuss everything from make-up to men, and although I never ask about their crimes, most of them have opened up to me and to one another. Many of the women are bitter, insecure and alone, and writing about their lives and feelings not only encourages their communication skills, but also has a cathartic effect.

"It's hard for outsiders to understand that prison not only robs these women of freedom, but also of dignity. Everybody has a right to dignity and I want to show them that things can be different.



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“The thought of not being there for my patients is unbearable. The appreciation in their eyes is so precious and it feels good to know that I bring light into their dark world. Life has been good to me and it’s rewarding to be able to give something back.” — Sheila

“Most of them come from troubled backgrounds and have often been exposed to alcoholism, prostitution and physical and sexual abuse at a very tender age. They also suffer the trauma of not being able to see their families. Some have been locked up for many years and never receive visitors, while others lie awake at night worrying about their children being cared for by an abusive husband. Writing about their stories helps them understand why they committed their crimes and how to deal with the consequences.

“I’m now trying to establish a halfway house where former inmates can learn to adjust to life outside prison before going back into society.

Many of them fear the day of their release — they often have nowhere to go and no family to rely on. They come out with the stigma of a prison record, so finding work isn’t easy and many may even end up behind bars again. It’s a vicious circle, and I want to teach them to trust themselves again, before others will.

“Knowing that these women share their grief and joy with me has been a very humbling experience. And they usually haven’t forgotten the joys of womanhood. Once, I received a donation of make-up for them; that gave them new pride in their appearances, increased confidence and self-respect. I feel good knowing that I am a part of that.”

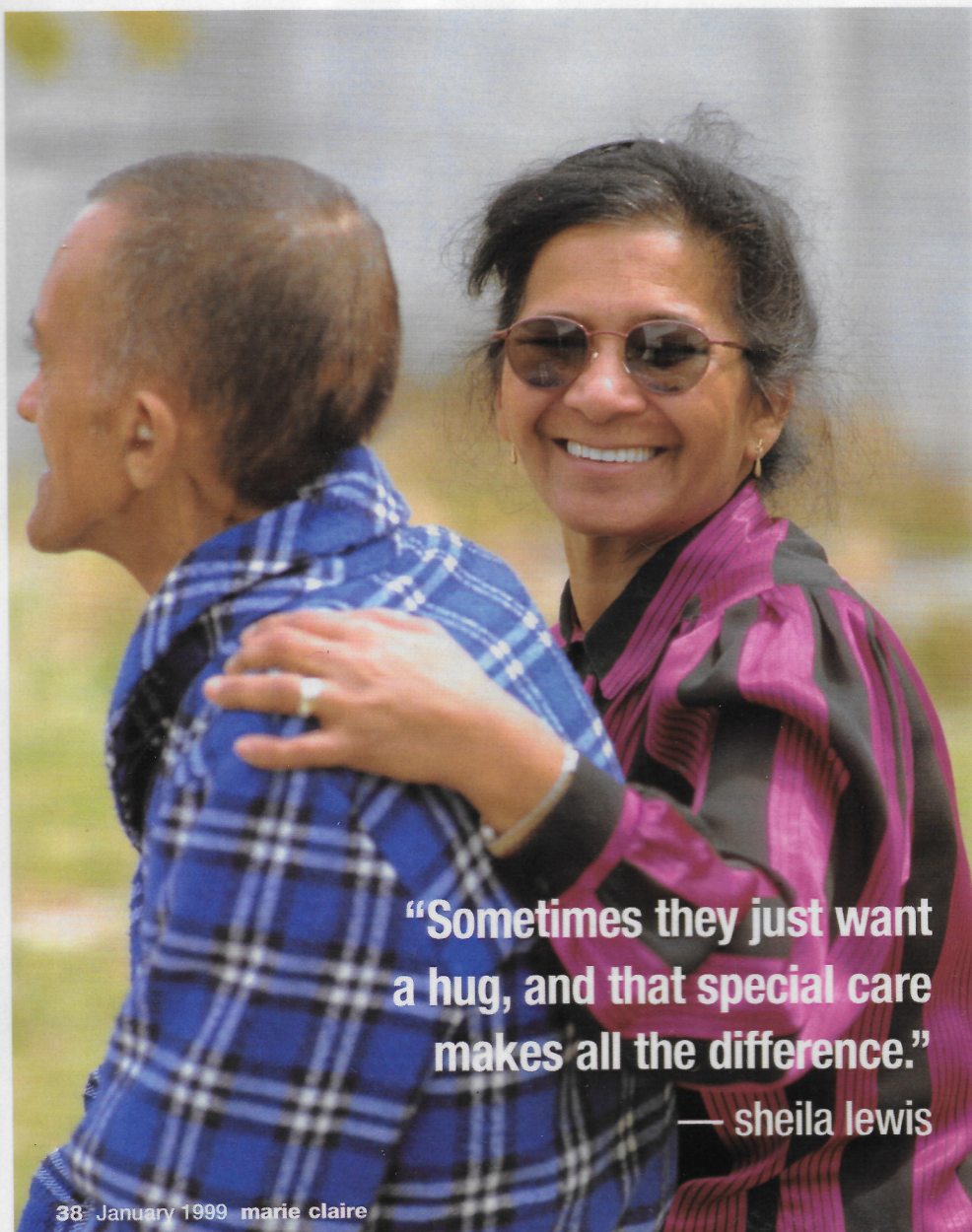
sheila lewis, 53, small business owner
Sheila has been actively involved in caring for terminally ill patients for more than eight years. After discovering that her Athlone community needed a place to cater for sick people in need, she developed a caring scheme with 40 trained caregivers. Sheila runs a small business from her home, and is a wife and mother, but she still finds time to visit patients at their homes and to coordinate her team.

“Ten years ago I lost my brother and my brother-in-law to cancer. My brother-in-law had no one to take care of him, so I looked after him for a year. After that, I wanted to get involved in caring for terminally ill patients in my community. I had no official training, so I approached a social worker at Groote Schuur Hospital who referred me to the National Cancer Association. When I discovered how startling the shortage of doctors and nurses was in my community, I completed an orientation and caregivers course with the Hospice Association, and that enabled me to assist with patients. I learnt how to give bed baths and take blood pressure, but I wanted to do more.

“In Athlone we didn’t have a Hospice, and patients didn’t get the care they needed, so I started working from home with two volunteers. We found that there was a great need for an office, so I approached the authorities and several day clinics and they finally managed to find us a small room in one of the clinics; a local charity organisation offered to pay for a sister, a social worker and our petrol costs. These patients need special care and costly medication, but I manage to get donations, and because the patients also want to help, we started a monthly craft market where they sell their handicrafts to raise funds.

“Lack of funds is an ongoing problem when it comes to taking care of patients with cancer and HIV, but personal care should never be neglected. Coming to terms with sickness and death isn’t easy, and I want to be there for them in any way I can. Sometimes they just want a hug or someone to read to them, and that special care makes all the difference.

“There’s a special bond between a caregiver and a patient, and their constant dependence can become very tiring. My involvement often means long, irregular hours away from home and I often have to cancel my personal plans to



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assist a patient. My family often have to share me with my responsibilities, but they view this as their part in making a difference. I have a tremendous support base.

“I sometimes feel like giving up, and I often tell myself that this will be my last year; I take comfort in the fact that I’ve trained a strong team of volunteers to take over from me. But, the thought of not being there for my patients is unbearable. The appreciation in their eyes is so precious and it feels good to know that I bring light into their often dark world. Life has been good to me and it’s rewarding to be able to give something back.”

veronica behm, 47, librarian

Veronica has been a children’s librarian for 14 years and aims to make a difference in her community through books. Two years ago, she persuaded her library that schools in local squatter camps needed more assistance than the general reading public. She began by getting book donations for township schools, and reading to children once a week. Today,

she also takes children on educational tours and encourages them to become informed.

“The schools in informal settlements have to get by on very little. Their schools are too small to accommodate everyone, and children must share desks and books. For example, there are about 300 pupils in the DuNoon School, one of the two schools which I visit, and they receive their education in a small ramshackle building where the classes are separated by cartons. The Marconi Beam School consists of a few portable containers and neither school has electricity.

“Despite the shortage of facilities, both of these schools have great teachers who have already laid the groundwork for their pupils’ education, but because of their disadvantaged backgrounds, they often still need to learn basic things which most privileged pupils take for granted. Like all children, these kids need a proper education and I want to help in this regard. It’s almost impossible for them to gain access to a library, so I take the library to them.

“Every week, I carefully select books for the different grades according to their educational

levels. The smaller children need pictures and colour, while the older ones are more interested in science and mathematics. Through these books, a new world of education is opened up to them. Sometimes I take my guitar along and teach them songs, and although I can’t speak Xhosa, we manage to understand one another, and their principal translates where necessary. I also encourage visits to the library and some pupils now make full use of our facilities.

“During school holidays, I try to involve them in our entertainment programmes and they now have the previously unknown luxury of watching videos and being read to.

“I feel proud that I’m helping to educate these young students. They’re more aware of what the library can offer and some have even become members. I enjoy being involved with them and their accepting me into their community has been a great honour. Even though they’re poor, they’re also proud children who want to learn, and I need to help their education because they’re part of the community and therefore part of my library.”



"I love every minute of this work, and I get more out of it than I put in."
— jean taylor

jean taylor, 50, housewife

Delivering food to the aged is Jean's way of giving back to her community. Jean grew up in Lancaster in the UK, where she provided temporary volunteer aid work to the elderly. When she became a South African 14 years ago, she wanted to do the same here. After approaching Meals on Wheels for the Aged in her neighbourhood, she's been a vital asset for more than nine years.

"In my family, voluntary community work was a way of life. My mother was always involved with caring for those in need, so it seemed natural for me to become as involved. Fortunately, it's also something I thoroughly enjoy.

"A few years ago, I quit my job at a local pharmacy. I was faced with the option of either going back to work or becoming involved in helping my

community. Meals on Wheels was looking for a 'hopper' and although at the time I didn't know what that meant, I would've been satisfied with peeling potatoes.

"As it turned out, 'hopping' means delivering food to elderly people who either can't afford a balanced meal or are unable to cook for themselves. I hop twice a week and, over the years, I've made new friends and met very interesting people. The elderly are often lonely and neglected by their families, so I sometimes just pop in for a friendly visit.

"I take interest in their lives and things which are important to them. Some of the people with whom I work have deep attachments to their pets, for example, and just stroking a dog can mean the world to them. I avoid getting too personally involved — although I care about these

people, it's best to keep our relationship professional. The elderly are proud people and the last thing they want is pity.

"My visits may help give them a reason to get up in the morning and also to look their best. The men shave and sometimes even dress in a shirt and tie, while for many women, it's an excuse to put on some make-up. Whenever they can, they try to give something back to us. At Christmas, I get small thank you gifts like chocolates or soap. A few years ago, an elderly woman was terribly embarrassed because she couldn't afford a gift for me. I asked for a smile instead, and I received the most beautiful gift, the memory of which is still with me.

"My work is humbling and truly rewarding. I might take a break once in a while, but could never stop being involved. I love every minute of this work, and I get more out of it than I put in."