

brave hearts

women who help the homeless

Some have not forgotten, and cannot ignore, the homeless who cross their paths. Nechama Brodie and Jo Lennox speak to women who are helping to break the cycle.

Every winter, homeless people die on our streets. Sometimes, somebody keeps vigil over the corpse, and waits for the police to arrive. But not always. Wrapped in shelters of cardboard and newspaper, South Africa's homeless are targets for the cold, hate, crime, derision. Hobos, beggars, *makwerekwere* — for most of us, they are nameless, faceless, soon forgotten.

Community workers estimate that some 20 000 homeless people live on the streets of Gauteng alone — this figure doesn't include inhabitants of informal settlements and shelters. Nationwide, there may be as many as one million homeless people.

There is no single reason why people take to the streets. In part, South Africa's homeless problem is attributable to apartheid's legacy: the Group Areas Act and forced migrant labour fragmented families and broke communities. Poor education and lack of employment opportunities also increased urbanisation. For children, poor support structures, abuse or simply childhood curiosity are all to blame. Whatever the reasons, the numbers are growing.

The government, United Nations and various charities have committed

themselves to projects aimed at eradicating poverty and homelessness in South Africa, but the real hope comes from the communities themselves. Internationally, strategies are becoming more people-centred, actively involving the poor and destitute in the search for solutions, encouraging economic and social empowerment.

As part of our year-long Help the Homeless Campaign, **marie claire** asked you to do just one act of kindness for one of the many homeless people you encounter. Homelessness is not someone else's problem — it belongs to us all. Through our regular features, photo-journalism and fund-raisers, **marie claire** has worked to help heighten awareness and show the human faces behind the brutal statistics. Many of our readers have shown great generosity. After one of our reader functions, we were able to give children at Kids' Haven, a shelter in Benoni, new school uniforms, shoes and bags — not to mention a new fridge and carpets. Many readers also donated useful items to the shelter.

In this final feature, we once again challenge you — to take heart and do something to help. The women featured have devoted themselves to do so; all we ask of you is to perform one kind act a month. It can make a difference.

Making your own contribution to this cause is easily done. Buy *Homeless Talk* and *The Big Issue* regularly. Donate your time, clothes, food or furniture to a shelter or join an association.

Homeless Talk (011) 838 2143 ***The Big Issue*** (021) 448 6690

Outreach programmes: **Paballo Ya Batho, Central Methodist Church:** Judy (011) 337 5938; **St George's United Community Church Outreach Programme:** Diane or Adelaide (011) 720 7911; **The Johannesburg Homeless Association:** Ebrahim (011) 720 1774.

Shelters for adults: **The Haven:** (021) 61 4209; **Somerset West Shelter:** (021) 851 4984; **Bellville Night Shelter:** (021) 949 1939; **Stellenbosch Night Shelter:** (021) 886 6173. **For children and teenagers:** **Streetwise Children's Shelters National Office:** (011) 402 4355; **Johannesburg:** Knox Mogashoa (011) 614 7883; **Soweto:** Minah Motaung (011) 982 5810; **Pretoria:** Molalefe Mashishi (012) 320 2231; **Durban:** Nomtuthu Zelo Nomkuca (031) 703 2666; **Twilight Children:** (011) 484 1590; **Highway Home:** (021) 510 4554; **Claremont Children's Shelter:** (021) 683 5756; **Ons Plek Shelter:** (021) 45 5421.

“We need to expand; with efficient support, we hope to be able to reach out to the homeless in other cities as well.”

— Glenda Nevill



Glenda Nevill, Editor, *The Big Issue*, Cape Town

Born in Pietermaritzburg and educated in Durban, Glenda worked on *The Citizen's Women's Page* before she moved to the *Sunday Times*, where she spent eight years as a Gauteng-based journalist and then as a foreign correspondent in London. She now lives in Observatory, Cape Town, with her boyfriend of 10 years.

“After working and freelancing for the commercial press for years, I wanted a new challenge, and *The Big Issue* offered a tremendous opportunity. I started helping out and I've been editor for eight months now. The sad truth is that homelessness will never cease to be a big issue and our magazine will always be needed. We're hoping to expand to other cities.

“*The Big Issue* aims to get to the root of the problem. Since we started two years ago, 1 096 vendors have signed on and we have 86 active and semi-active members selling the magazine. The concept works because all of our hearts are in the project.

“The vendors are self-employed and don't answer to anyone; we really work for them. We don't offer handouts; we aim to encourage the awareness that you don't get anything for nothing. We also offer courses and counselling.

“We encounter heartbreaking stories every day, so we can't help becoming emotionally involved with our vendors. All *Big Issue* staffers spend a day selling the magazine on the streets with the vendors — a frustrating and sometimes humiliating experience. Most people simply look straight through you. On my day out, I only managed to sell three magazines. The vendors often drop in at the office to see how the magazine is put together; it's a great compliment that more and more people are realising that *The Big Issue* is a good read, not just a sympathy buy.

“The success stories which result from *The Big Issue* are immensely rewarding. During the last two years, 52 of our vendors have moved on to full-time jobs and homes, and many have conquered major drug and alcohol problems. It feels good to know that I'm part of that.”



“You can't help becoming emotionally involved with the vendors,” says Glenda (second from left), with *Big Issue's* social development coordinator, Debi Diamond (left), psychologist Karen Hendricks (second from right) and distribution assistant, Martha Hiebner (right).

photography: Dale Yudelman.

“How you touch people isn't by giving them things. The most important thing is to help people discover that they're human.”

— Diane Wicks



Reverend Diane Wicks, St George's United Church, Johannesburg

A native New Yorker, Diane came to South Africa eight years ago as a peace and justice worker, before she was ordained. With the stressful load of a violence monitor, she found refuge in the congregation of St George's Church, Johannesburg.

“St George's has been running a soup kitchen for several years — originally for white alcoholics in the Hillbrow/Joubert Park area. By the time I arrived, nearly all the people we were serving were black and homeless. I had done similar work in the US and was asked to help create a new programme here, something that provided more than temporary relief.

“The first thing I realised was that we weren't understanding the people who were coming to the soup kitchen, so I got somebody to start translating for me. The programme has grown a great deal over the last six years. We run a soup kitchen two nights a week, but also assist homeless and unemployed people to empower themselves, by helping them to find jobs and counselling them. We offer healing workshops which are all about healing inner wounds, involving guided meditations and using creative arts to unlock the inner self. We can't just help people materially — we have to deal with the root of the problem.

“I've often seen people begin to develop and stabilise, only to fall back into the same destructive patterns. Our workshops and support groups give people the opportunity to change their lives forever — but most people are only interested in the soup and bread.”



Diane doesn't consider herself a conventional church person, but feels very close to her congregation because of the time she spends with them. Her office functions as a central point where people can send and receive faxes and make phone calls in their search for work (above).

photography: Jodi Fisher

Judy Bassingthwaite, director of Paballo Ya Batho, Johannesburg

From small-town Namibia to Johannesburg's city centre, Judy gave up a teaching career to work with the poor and homeless. Since 1991, she has been involved with Paballo Ya Batho (Caring For The People), a programme aimed at providing food and basic medical care to people on the streets.

"I came here in 1987 to train as a pre-school teacher, and found a spiritual home in the church. The Group Areas Act was still in place and I started befriending people living in the city illegally.

"In 1991 I decided to work here full-time, even though it meant a huge drop in salary. Then one of the church friars called upon all the churches to put one night a week aside for the poor. We started with one bucket of soup and a cake tin of medical supplies and grew from there. Because I had been involved with St John's First Aid, I worked on the medical teams. I saw limbs rotting off and maggots crawling in them. People are living in horrific health conditions.

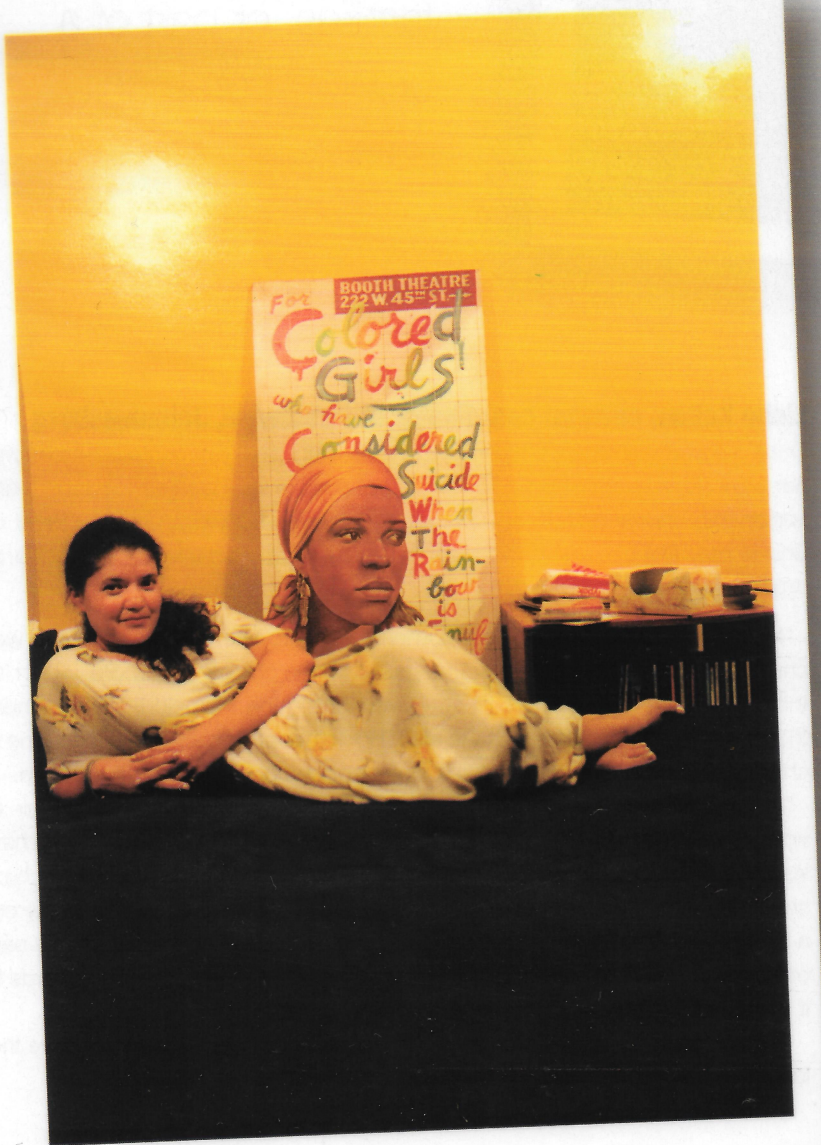
"It's very easy to patronise the poor. What we've done is form a relationship with homeless people so that we can hear what their needs are, not what we perceive them to be. It's important to affirm the human dignity of all. We ask volunteers to come and help us, leave behind their secure environments and, for one night, experience life without a credit card.

"I also do counselling, which involves everything from finding missing children to HIV counselling. But it can get frustrating — like when I can't even buy school books for a child."



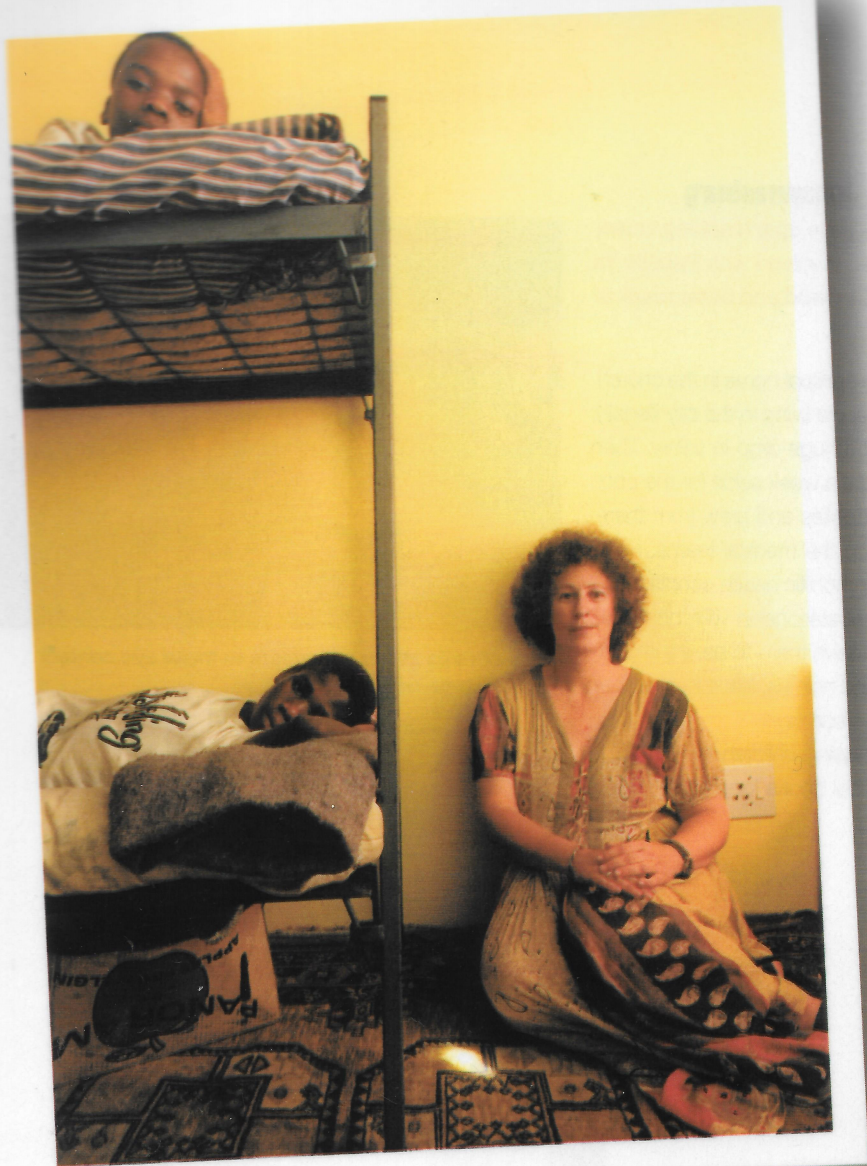
photography: Jodi Bieber

Judy advises all her volunteers to make eye contact with each person they meet.



"It's a two-way ministry: we've formed a partnership with homeless people — to hear what their needs are, not what we perceive their needs to be. It's easy to patronise the poor."

— Judy Bassingthwaite



“Our role is temporary; when we make contact with a child on the street, we don’t regard that child as ‘our child’ — we see them as being part of families, or part of a broader community.”

— Liebe Kellen

Liebe Kellen, national coordinator of Streetwise, Johannesburg

Once a social worker for Child Welfare, Liebe frequently encountered street children in her work. After establishing a shelter for young girls she decided to move to an organisation that offered broader opportunities to do developmental work for street children. She is now the national coordinator for Streetwise, which has five shelters and two drop-in centres across South Africa.

“Most of my work is staff development, trying to fine-tune the way we work with children. I don’t have much direct contact with the children any more, which is something that I miss. Sometimes I’ll stay overnight in the Mamelodi shelter where, even though my main contact is with the staff, I look for opportunities to spend time with the children. It’s important that they see we’re not completely distant from them.

“At Streetwise we’re working towards reconciling the children with their families, when we can. It’s important that we don’t raise a generation of children who have been institutionalised. But our role is temporary; when we make contact with a child on the street, we don’t regard them as ‘our child’. We see them as part of a family or part of a broader community. When a child leaves us, we see it as a graduation to a new stage of life rather than a termination. All the parties have worked very hard towards this and it needs to be acknowledged.

“Part of going through Streetwise is also about de-labelling. When they leave they’re no longer ‘streetkids’; they’re Streetwise children.”

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photography: Jodi Bieber.



Liebe and shelter-mother Jane Mashishi watch as the boys test their soccer skills. She regularly visits children at the Mamelodi shelter (top).