

The below document is the report of Camilla Zard, who has been working at Village Heights as part of an internship. This report was written in May 2017. All original spelling and punctuation has been preserved.

Author's note

My name is Camilla Zard and I am twenty years old. I am half Ecuadorian and half Lebanese. My mother tongues are Spanish and French. English is only my third language so please forgive any shortcomings with my writing style! I am studying at Northeastern University in the United States and I am now interning in Cape Town Environmental Education Trust (CTEET), supported by the Environmental Management Department. I work once or twice a week in Village Heights, which has been an eye opening and amazing experience to be able to work with this community. This newsletter will introduce some of the people and organizations who are driving impact in the community as well benefiting from community initiatives.

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?



Realising the dream of a community garden

The idea of a community garden in Village Heights to connect the community with nature started five years ago. The idea comes because of the fence that separates the community with False Bay Nature Reserve. There have been several delays in the process but the construction has started this year. The project is a partnership between the National Department of Environmental Affairs, The City of Cape Town, the people from Village Heights, and the implementing agent Vital Connection. We hope that now that the project has started everyone will work together to make it a success. I interviewed Marijke Honig, a botanist and designer who has put together the design for the garden.

"Because it is such a nice piece of land on the edge of this nature reserve, our initial concept was to utilize the whole area and we decided to not garden everywhere but to create point of interests", Marijke said. "For example, there is a dune where the kids can play, cycling paths, and more. When we listened to the residents it seemed like their biggest concern was safety. So we thought well, how can we change that? We felt that having more activities where the members of the community could hang out would help create vigilance over this area."

Moreover, the youth are now hanging out on the street corners so they wanted to create a focal point hence the idea of creating the garden. There is focal point in the garden called the "tyre forest" where people can hang out. They will plant trees that will grow in a way where the branches will criss-cross making a natural gym.

"What was made clear is that we cannot use anything of value like metal and wood. Tyres are the main building block. There used to be a lot of tyres in this area because people use to strip cars. Therefore, their tyres will be used as a retaining structure. If you paint the tyres it could look really nice and it would be more fun."

Marijke has made provision for picnic spots, climbing equipment for the older children, a gym area with fitness poles, a community hub, and a slack line. *"I am hoping to create activity so this area is overlooked and the criminals go somewhere else. The crimes will always be there unfortunately but hopefully not in the garden."*

There will also be an area called the living library where there will be a whole set of edible and medicinal plants with little labels so the children and the community can learn about them. They would like to use recyclable material to create the labels, like plastic containers. *"The real vivacious part of this project is creativity. I hope*

that the tyre seats they are going to put concrete on will be used as mosaic like structure to make the rubble quite decorative in this area. This particular community is filled with creativity, they could do little butterflies with plastic wings and make flowers with plastic bottles. I would like there to be an activity where the community members will come and write down their wishes for this space. It's those little things that will help make people excited about the project."

Marijke has kept it very low-tech project. *"We have to keep reminding ourselves it's so prone to vandalism that we couldn't do more elaborate work. We still hope that the people will contribute to making it a sustainable project and that they will help protect it. My best wish for this project is that people will feel excited and proud of what they have achieved, that a real creative element be present and that they like and look out for it. That it will become a social space where people can hang out."*

Recycling at Village Heights

A recycling project has been put in place since 2015 to teach children to recycle and to clean out recyclable trash in Village Heights. I wanted to fully understand how this project worked so I personally interviewed Sonia Moses, the owner of Deslin Traders, which is the recycling company.

Sonia has three employees helping her with this project. Two of them are working at two different schools and one of them is working at her home. The employee at her home goes out every morning and collects whatever recyclables she finds lying around Village Heights and brings it to Sonia's yard. Once in the yard, she sorts them out into different categories. She says some Village Heights residents also bring some recyclables to Sonia's house, but only very few do so. Every month, a truck picks up the recyclable materials and she receives a payment that's proportionate to the amount of recyclables.

Concerning the schools, they rely on the children bringing recyclables from their homes. In doing so, they receive swap shop tokens in return. Every month, they bring the swap tokens to the swap shop and receive a prize in return. At first, the prizes were either stationary or sweets but then they switched to stationary or toys. They found out that when they took the sweets away, the children were less inclined to bring recyclables. At first, teachers thought the children needed stationary rather than luxuries because of the parents' financial problems although now they realised luxuries were more attractive and are therefore trying to reinstate them. In addition, they want to make the exchange possible more often instead of monthly to further encourage the implemented process.

In each class there is box for recyclables. She explained that many kids throw anything in and don't really care about recycling. Sonia tries to talk to the classes in order to try to influence and educate the children on why recycling is important. Apparently, some children listen but that she feels she needs the support of the teachers as well nonetheless. *"Not all the teachers are interested in recycling"*. How can you educate children about recycling if the people they look up to don't support it? I believe this to be a big problem. Children need to be taught about this issue at school, where they go every day with the open-mindedness learning requires. Another problem is that the children's sole motivation for recycling is the prize they get in return: they have no regard to the environment whatsoever. Moreover, some of the parents do not support recycling, which is also problematic. As she exclaimed: *"Children look up to their parents and if their parents do not like to recycle than they do not want to either"*. Nevertheless, Sonia remains motivated for change, as she puts it: *"I am trying and I will continue to try to pursue the children to recycle"*.

Even though recycling income has gone down and paying the workers has become difficult, she is still set on trying to figure out ways to make recycling more successful. For example, she had a new project in mind which involved adding a new primary school every six months to her recycling project. Unfortunately, that has not yet been possible because of the small income recycling provides but she is still approaching the schools. She went to the Coastal Park landfill site to see if recycling existed there. She realised that they don't recycle at all which is shameful since a lot of recyclables go through that site. She is therefore trying to begin a recycling project at

that location and waiting on their response. She also re-uses tyres and does tyre art with the children at the schools.

The most important thing to fix is not only recycling problems in the schools, but also to educate the resident parents of Village Heights. A good idea would be to do workshops or even a seminar. Since children look up to their parents, this would be very beneficial to the cause.

Village Heights Community Centre

Bernadine Thomas manages Village Heights Community Centre NPO. She is 40 years old and has been married for 19 years. She has six children and one grandchild. Her and her family have been living in Village Heights for eleven years. She started her work nine years ago when she decided that they needed a library in the community because the closest library is quite far. She said: *"With the help of Mrs. Van Ryneveld it was possible to complete. They put up the structure and since then we look after children there too."* The crèche is called Gift of Hope. This year they started off with ten children but the number dropped with time. As she stated: *"In previous years we would have 50 children, but last year 20. The reason why, I am not sure but I think it is because we make people more aware to start their own business. We used to be the only crèche but now there are three other crèches. Also because we are also trying to focus not only on babies and target on dropouts, children that do not go school anymore."* She explained that they are not happy their numbers have dropped yet they are accepting of the situation since their focus is to target other, younger ones, and try to get them in the centre and help them as well. From this library Bernie and her co-workers have expanded by working with Projects Abroad. Projects Abroad has helped extensively. They helped with things like the building, community work, fitness classes, and more. They also started meeting with the City of Cape Town and CTEET. The children have learned to pick up litter in the community garden and other projects include visiting the nature reserve.

Bernie also registered an NPO four years ago with the support of Zandvlei Trust based at the library and the crèche where she is able to receive funding, support, and more. *"The NPO started by working on the library and the crèche. But we also put other stuff in there like community work, outreach programs as well. Also, we have our knitting and sewing group."* Mrs. Van Ryneveld helped them start the knitting and sewing group in order to teach the ladies to manage their own business. After her passing, Mrs. Joan Wigram helps them with the knitting and sewing. They sell their produce at various markets and events.

I decided to ask Bernie about her vision of the future. She replied: *"I love what I do, I am not sorry for starting this, I am happy with what I did. I do not see myself in the future, in the next 10 years, as the chairperson of Village Heights. I see the NPO bigger. People coming in and out, people working here. I do not see myself moving along with it as I would like to move onto something new. Things are happening now like the nature garden the project that we have been talking about many years it is happening. The people's mind-set is open, knowing that they can do stuff in this community. I feel that myself I need to move on."*

She explained that she wants to apply to study social development because she feels that a larger group needs her help. She would like to work at the centre and to study part time. She added: *"This NPO is and always will be a part of my life. My granny used to raise foster kids. I could never understand why our house was full of children. Why would she want to look after other people's children? Why is she reaching out? Through this work, I realized why she has been doing it and I have experienced actually why you need to reach out. The reason is that there is always a need to help children. In different ways not everybody needs the same thing. I can go into other children's life and make a difference. I feel like I have made a huge difference in Village Heights. A lot of people that never knew this place got to know this place. Because I have done that, Village Heights is not just known here in South Africa but in other parts of the world! I feel like I need to start focusing on my life and on my family's life because it has always been the community centre before my family for years. For a couple of weeks I have felt heartbroken because I am just realizing that now. A person told me this place is and will always be here. So go and focus on your family. I am happy with what I do but not in the circumstances that I am in."*

Helping hands from Abroad

Projects Abroad is an international volunteer organisation. They have been working next to the premises of the Thomas' home, building a community centre for the children of Village Heights. The project is managed by Deen Singh and has been going on for seven years. Once the centre is finished it will be very beneficial to the children of the community. There will be three different rooms. One of them is a classroom, which has already been finished and is being used for teaching subjects ranging from nutrition to regular schoolwork. The other building will be focused on computer literacy, to teach children about debating and politics as well. The last room will be used for teaching knitting and sewing skills, counselling workshops, and more. The buildings are built with sand bags which is a very smart way of building. In fact, sandbags are an eco- and bio-friendly type of construction. They are 95% fire resistant, have thermal insulation qualities as well, and are bullet proof.

The volunteers are very hardworking and friendly with the community. Their work on those buildings is an example of their humanitarian approach to the benefit of the community. There are other projects happening in Village Heights managed by Projects Abroad as well. For example, volunteers come twice a week to do sports with the women and to teach them about healthy lifestyle. Not to mention the surfing project that gives the kids a chance to learn how to surf, and much more. Projects Abroad has had a tremendous positive impact on the Village Heights community.

Learning, planting, and some fun!

Bennet Ziegler, a German volunteer working at CTEET, comes to the Community Centre every Thursday to help in the garden. Bennet also spends time teaching the children how to protect the garden and grow plants. For example, he once planned for all the children to come over and planned plenty of activities. He also gave a small lecture about planting and photosynthesis. Furthermore, the children painted wooden tablets and planted cilantro in the garden. He also made them pick up all the trash that was in the garden and put it in the trash skip to teach them about cleanliness. He explained to them how long plastic and other waste items that are discarded actually stay in the earth if you do not put them in the garbage and how they harm the environment. The project was successful and the children learned a lot. He also helps with the afternoon classes and with the crèche in his spare time.

LIFE ON THE INSIDE

Here are few stories about living in Village Heights. I wanted to find out more about how people experience living in Village Heights so I decided to interview some of the people I met there.

Edwina Thomas

Edwina (18) is currently in her last year of high school. She got pregnant when she was sixteen years old, making her high school years an extremely hard time for her. For her, her life had come to an end. Nevertheless, she decided to move forward and get her life together: *"I dragged myself up out from the dust, if you are going to have a baby you are not going to sit a home because there is no use for it. You cannot do anything for your baby. My child will grow up in a township like this and it is going to be unfair to her."* Her parents and family helped her greatly and stood with her and made her strive to be best. Even though she was lucky enough to have a supportive family, the father's family chose a different path regarding the manner. She feels in danger because of the gunshots they hear, the gangs on the loose and feels very unsafe at night where they can't even leave home. In her opinion, it is harder for boys to grow up there because of the gangs like the Funkies and Corner Boys. She explained that because of that reason most of the boys drop out of school, they are threatened and innocent lives get taken. Sometimes the boys have to cover themselves up to go from one place to another so they won't be recognized. Everyone feels: *"it's like a big prison we are living in"*.

Her dream is to change the world. *"One person can make a change and I believe that. This place yeah, is dangerous. Life at the end of the day is what you can make of it, struggle so you can become something, you know. I want to get my family out of this place. Every day it seems to get harder and more evil is coming upon this place."*

Jamy-Lee Thomas

Jamie-Lee (15) is a young girl who believes that high school is somewhat of a big adventure. According to her, her life is kind of difficult. She said: *"life is difficult but I am coping thanks to my parents who have my back when I need them."* She has four sisters and one brother. It is hard for her brother because he is the only boy apart from her dad. In addition, she doesn't have her own space: the six of them share a bathroom and a bedroom. In her free time, she goes to the park or the library to get a more private feeling but she feels in danger especially at night. She struggles because she cannot go out with friends since it's dangerous, kids are disappearing, she proclaimed. Her dream is to have a diminished number of high school dropouts; she believes this to be a major problem in their community.

Tanya and Carl Adams

Tanya (39) has three children aged 18, 9 and 3 years old. Her eldest son, Carl (18), dropped out of school at the age of fifteen and has a child. He dropped out because he was fighting at school and getting bullied. He tried switching schools but they were all full. He watches the place all day and doesn't work. She believes the place needs surveillance because of all the robberies. The violence is very intense because of the gangsters, as he put it: *"My life is not perfect here, some struggles we do have but most of the time its violence."* Her place burned down a year ago because her neighbour's house started burning and the fire escalated to her home. The City only sponsored them with blankets and clothes but no food whatsoever. Now, she lives in a small room for her whole family which was donated, it contains two beds, and a tiny cooking area. In her home, five people are living in one room and sharing two beds. Her previous house was bigger and had three rooms making it far more accommodating. Nowadays, they live with no space or privacy whatsoever. Regarding the topic, Carl said: *"Everybody is on top of each other. My mother is getting annoyed with us because she loses patience with the overcrowding."*

Tanya would like to see less teenagers getting pregnant and dropping out of school because they rely solely on the government's support, which is basically non-existent.

Angelique Kullier

Angelique (48) has four children. She has a severe heart problem which doesn't give her the opportunity to work and has to go regularly to the hospital. *"Every year I go to disability grant and I must renew it every year."* She lives in fear because of her health. Yet, she said: *"Many times we have no food to eat but Bernie and Tanya have helped me out. Sometimes we struggle."* She said that she struggles as well with her children and her grandchildren. Her children are not very helpful when it comes to bringing income into the family. She explains that the children and the community live in danger because of the gangsters and the shootings: *"They fight with each other even when the children are around"*.

Editorial: My work

I have really enjoyed my time at Village Heights and learnt much from my experience. In the mornings I work helping the women in the crèche and sometimes with the building project. The kids have started to get to know me, remember me and started to get excited when I come every Thursday. It has been life changing. I love working with the kids but it has not been easy. A lot of them are aggressive with each other and do not like to share. Some of them resolve their issues by hitting each other instead of discussing rationally. I have been very strict with them on that matter and teaching them has made me get close to them. I have also seen a nutritional problem with the food that their parents send them for lunch. Most of the time, the children are fed synthetic juices that ruin their teeth and only pieces of bread with cheese on most days, which is not nutritional. In the afternoon the job gets more intense. I work with four different age groups for 30 minutes each for two to two and a half hours straight. The first two groups are the smaller kids. These are kids that have had problems in school with reading. Most of them knew the alphabet song but when I showed them a letter they did not know which one it was.

The third group are kids that know how to read a little bit but are struggling and need practice. All three groups receive homework to train them further during the week. Finally, the fourth and last group are the high school kids. I teach them about time management and how to handle their lives in a healthier and smarter way.

I give them homework as well like making a to-do list and then the following week we talk about their difficulties and how to improve them. I always ask for their feedback on how useful the tips and lessons I teach have been and honestly I have seen a lot of improvement.

Nevertheless, I think that one time a week is not enough to make a big difference for these kids. The difference I have been making is visible but it is not sufficient. There should be volunteers doing the afternoon classes twice or three times a week for there to be a significant improvement on the children. The struggle of these children is real and constant help is absolutely needed.