

crossing the digital divide

Enterprise Development Award – Runner-up
Umjindi Resource Centre

The Umjindi Resource Centre in Barberton is a unique “digital village” that is widely used by the community at large, and is particularly helpful for entrepreneurs and small businesses in the difficult start-up phase.

Conceptualised by paper and pulp company Sappi in response to significant levels of unemployment in Umjindi, the centre is a section 21 company funded mainly by Sappi and the Umjindi Municipality.

The centre opened in 2005 and its purpose is to empower locals by bridging the digital divide in this rural community. It is the only project of its kind in the lowveld.

Researchers from the University of Johannesburg described the centre as “a vibrant learning hub that positively affects the very social fabric of the community by generating linking and bridging capital for marginalised members, providing them entry into the virtual world of knowledge”.

The centre’s manager, Ananda Godfrey,

points out the sponsors insist that it maintains its self-imposed status as a true community project – “for the people, by the people”.

“For this reason, membership fees are kept as low as possible and access is free to people who are registered on the municipality’s indigent roll,” she says.

The centre has more than 4 200 permanent members and also serves walk-in customers. Its services include:

- Thirty-six computers with fast broadband Internet access, and access to Microsoft Office programmes.
- A well-equipped research and reference library.
- A computer-based reading development programme that improves literacy.
- Digital encyclopaedias.
- Basic computer literacy training.
- Assistance with school projects, curriculum work and research.

The centre is managed by five permanent employees, a dedicated group of volunteers, an

executive committee and a board of directors. All come from the local community to ensure the centre remains relevant to the needs of the people it serves.

Godfrey says being able to contribute in a meaningful way to the development of locals, especially children and young people, is rewarding.

“Assisting learners and knowing that they will get better marks at school because of it puts a smile on my face every day,” she says.

The volunteer programme is a stepping stone for unemployed youths who undergo a skills development programme and learn work ethics. Many local businesses recruit new employees from this volunteer group.

“Coaching and mentoring volunteers, and sharing in their joy when the hard work pays off and they get a job, is simply not an experience you get in many other careers,” Godfrey adds.

Aspiring entrepreneurs can use the centre as their office. This means they can dedicate precious start-up capital towards growing the business instead of establishing an office.

Unemployed locals use the centre to prepare professional CVs and apply for positions online. Older people use the centre to keep in contact with family living abroad.

“I simply don’t know what the area would do without this centre,” Godfrey says. “If it was up to me, I would lead the drive to open a resource centre in every little town – we definitely need more centres like this one.”

It is a sentiment shared by the Making the Difference judges, who singled out the centre for its skills development project. “In addition to being a valuable resource for the community, the centre is a fantastic enterprise itself. We need more of these centres,” the judges said. *Umjindi Resource Centre: 013 712 6552 or manager@umjindiresourcecentre.org.za*

Clockwise, from top left: Learners can access digital encyclopaedias at the centre; the centre’s manager, Ananda Godfrey, receives the Making the Difference award from Guma representative Mario Pillay; there are 36 computers at the centre with broadband Internet access



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tomorrow's leaders

Not-for-profit Organisations Award – Winner
Desmond Tutu Centre for Leadership Orchard Camp

Children robbed of their families by the HIV/Aids pandemic often also have to deal with the stigma associated with the disease. Without positive intervention, they can become despondent and anti-social.

The Desmond Tutu Centre for Leadership (C4L), a faith-based non-profit organisation in White River, uses peer counselling to create an environment in which young people can discuss and confront difficult life issues.

Established 10 years ago as a leadership training facility for practitioners in the NGO field, the centre soon branched into training teachers working with orphans and vulnerable children.

Kids clubs were established at schools in local areas with a high HIV/Aids infection rate. Teachers, caregivers and youth leaders were trained as mentors and taught how to identify, counsel and assist orphans and vulnerable children.

Administration assistant Portia Dlamini says in December 2004 a C4L delegation made a reconnaissance trip to Masiye Camp in Zimbabwe, where they worked as volunteers for several weeks.

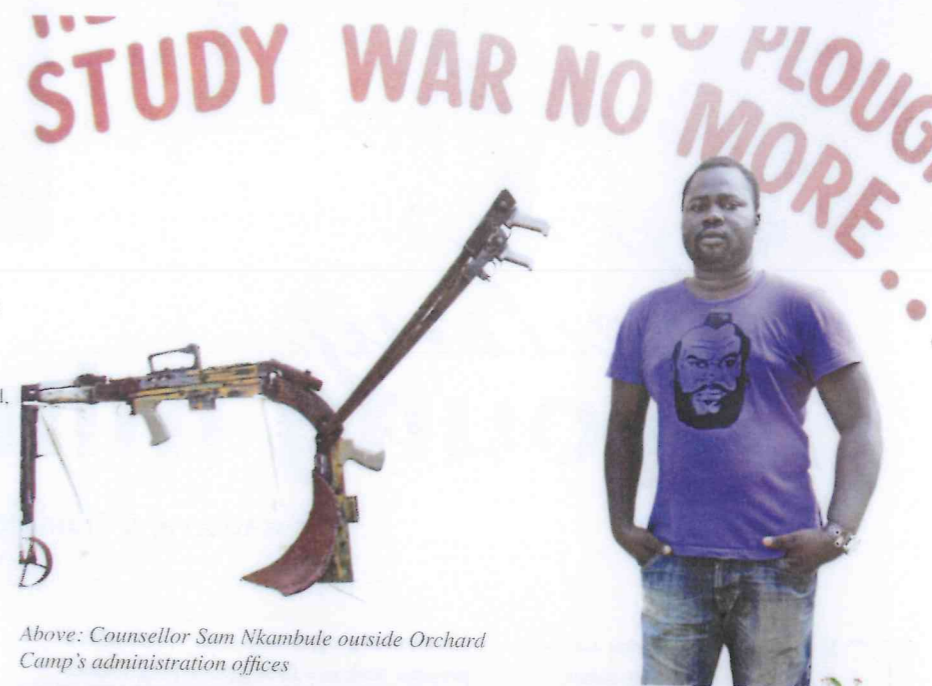
“They came back raving and recommended to the C4L board that a camp be built on our campus to replicate Masiye Camp in an adapted way,” she says. This was the genesis of Orchard Camp at C4L.

During the July and December school holidays, Orchard Camp hosts up to 50 needy children at a time. Most are orphans and vulnerable children who need “resilience training”.

“When they return to their home, school and community, they are better able to cope,” says Dlamini. “This has to do with skills acquired, but also a change in attitude.”

They receive counselling from peers to help them get over their pain, and are taught life-skills and problem-solving. They also receive training in income-generating “hard skills”, such as cultivating food gardens, beading and other crafts.

One of the tools at Orchard Camp is a



Above: Counsellor Sam Nkambule outside Orchard Camp’s administration offices

“It is a demanding, emotionally driven and draining experience working with these kids, but also incredibly rewarding”

training manual designed to motivate campers and encourage dialogue.

Camp counsellors are youth leaders who attend a four-day training course before the children arrive at Orchard Camp. Local and international volunteers also assist.

“In 2009 we adopted the theme ‘Youth taking charge,’” says Dlamini. “Most of the staff are youths, and a youth has been invited to join the C4L board. It is a centre basically run by youth for youth.”

“The strategy started with Orchard Camp and is now spreading across the whole of C4L.”

The centre invested R100 000 of its own reserves to build Orchard Camp, and received donations of R200 000. Camps are mainly funded by an organisation from Canada called Reachout to Africa.

The deputy director of C4L, Ben-Christo

van der Westhuizen, describes the psycho-social camps run at Orchard Camp as “amazing. They involve a lot of social activities, but also enable us to identify medical issues, psychological issues and abuse.”

Children are sometimes referred to the Greater Nelspruit Rape Intervention Project, child welfare or the department of social development.

“It is a demanding, emotionally driven and draining experience working with these kids, but also incredibly rewarding,” says Van der Westhuizen. “The impact has been tangible – for some kids, it’s a life-changing experience.”

The Making the Difference judges were impressed that Orchard Camp and most of its programmes are run by youths, praising it as an “incubator for the leaders of tomorrow”.

Desmond Tutu Centre for Leadership: 013 750 1227 or hospitality@c4l.org