

MARLENE LE ROUX: BIOGRAPHY FOR CHILDREN COMMISSIONER

"I believe the children are our future...teach them well and let them lead the way..."

In any society, but more particularly with South Africa and Africa's history, anyone who is serious about being a true advocate for human rights and who wants to be a social leader in support of the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups (including the rights of the disabled and particularly our children) must be fully aware of what real *social justice* means.

In order for that to happen we must start with our children. The overarching umbrella under which our children will thrive are: protection, love, care, education, inclusion and a value system congruent with our country's constitution. I further believe we can only really give this to them if we involve parents, caregivers and teachers and every concerned citizen.

My career spans a lifetime of involvement and dedication to education and youth development (to this day). I was involved in many different capacities: from teacher to subject adviser to starting and developing choirs in underprivileged communities in the Western Cape. I have been involved with Chrysalis Youth Academy for the past 15 years. Through this and other youth projects, I realise more and more that the formative years are of paramount importance in shaping the young adults that this country so sorely needs. Young adults that are well adjusted, critical thinking, responsible, ethical and hungry to make positive contributions to society.

What further ingrained these beliefs is my close involvement for the last 17 years with the SBA (Stigting vir Bemagtiging deur Afrikaans). Working in rural, farm (and in destitute) communities, one truly learns just how vital the involvement of a parent or caregiver is. It is through this work that I am reminded how often education – the simplest thing like reading and writing – that privileged city dwellers take for granted, is not scoffed at in communities that the SBA covers. At SBA we try to assist the Education Department to be of service with the ZOE reading programming for Grade R and Grade 1. This programme is to enhance the basic skills to read and write for both young children and their parents. Areas that we have covered successfully are Saron, Tulbagh, Boland Areas, Matzikama, Karoo as far as Murraysburg, Witzenberg and Hessequa Municipalities, Guguletu, Khayeletisha and Mitchell Plain. But our focus is mainly on the Farm and Rural areas.

While completing my M.Phil at UCT specialising in Disability Studies in 2018 I realised the importance of spreading the knowledge that the child with disabilities and their families need more support economically, emotionally and supportive care. Persons with disabilities in our constitution states must have equal access to education, employment and basic services and reasonable accommodation. We can all throw words like *diversity* and *inclusion* about and how society will benefit by opening our eyes and ears to the lessons that can be learnt by our children with disabilities. Disability is created by the way in which society responds to disabilities. The humanity of children with disabilities is intertwined with our humanity. Hence my involvement with Friends Day Care Centre, who accommodates children with mentally, severe, multiple physical disabilities.

I served on the commission for the rights, protection and promotion for Culture, Religion and Language for two terms, and I am currently serving on the Presidential Task Team for persons with disabilities. This forum is to evaluate and to monitor all Ministries to audit as it were whether persons with disabilities are included in their policies and whether policies are implemented with the understanding of the holistic development and creating of meaningful opportunities for all children especially those with disabilities. My involvement with the Desmond and Leah Legacy Foundation introduced me to the inspiring work the staff are doing at the Groote Schuur and Tygerberg Children Units.

Children should have fun and be groomed to think creatively as well. Therefore more recreational centres with caregivers should be established. Our vision should be that the social worker *must* play a more prominent role in our society. Social workers are important to guide and to be the moral compasses of our society, hence my involvement with the ACVV (Organisation that is built on the principles of the creed of the principles of social working). And let us not forget the role that the arts can play in bringing about social cohesion and justice. Here, I believe children's theatre and exposure to the arts in all its forms can play a paramount role in shaping a holistic, happy child. All that is required is a simple word: *access*. What better playground than to channel their imaginations into some form of artistic expression? Being part of Artscape, has given me a deep insight into the power of the arts as a tool of creative thinking and influence.

In conclusion, I believe we need to re-look across ministries and properly evaluate whether policies are viable, achievable and implementable. Education, Health Care, proper shelter, good parenting should be non-negotiables if we want grounded young people and ethical leadership in the future. Neglecting them at a young stage is a recipe for disaster. We often get stuck on the theory. Everyone can do what I am doing here – talk about '*what*' should be done. The time is right for implementation and looking at the '*how*' so that we can truly and honestly change the quality of life of our children. And yes, policies and the law play vital roles in the shaping of our society but the cultivation of a healthy, happy, fulfilled child does not happen without proper resources and systems in place. And what it comes down to, is a word called *Humanity*. Through our humanness we will know that there are places in this city, in this province, in this country and on this continent that are not conducive for a child to be reared unless we change it, as human being to human being. I have been involved at a strategic level over a number of years as an employee and also at a board level. This exposure will assist this commission at that level to shape direction, draw up policies, review articulate and implement.

It truly does take a village to raise a child. In our case, a city, a province, a country, a continent...after all, are we not a global village? My personal journey from childhood to my career attests to the above. It is this life experience I will plough back, handing over the button to the next generation.