

Woman who built a caring world for people

Helen Lieberman believes in helping the less fortunate help themselves and has spread her NGO's wings to everyone from children, to the disabled, to seniors

BACK in the 1960s, a speech therapist working at Cape Town's Groote Schuur hospital made a grim discovery. Helen Lieberman had decided to track down a baby who had not received adequate therapy. She drove out of Cape Town to Langa and found the baby in a shack.

The conditions were terrible; there was no clean water, no comfort.

As Lieberman reflected years later: "You didn't see into Langa from the N2: it was hidden by thick trees and bushes. It was probably designed that way.

"But when I went there, I thought I was looking into hell. There was squalor, poverty and fear. The people's fear was what struck me most. It was so overwhelming and terrible. I couldn't imagine this existed in my own country and I knew I could not live and watch it happening, without trying to help.

"We each have to carry our own conscience. At least now I can face myself, having tried to do something about it."

That experience changed Lieberman's life. But the triumph of that change is that she and the organisation that gradually came into being as part of her caring for people less fortunate, have changed so many other people's lives.

Trying to get her to tell the story is difficult. There is almost a hostility, a fierce shield long since erected to preserve her emotions and downgrade her role. She much prefers it that way. But the facts speak for themselves.

Today Ikamva Labantu is a non-profit organisation that helps thousands of people in need in South Africa. It builds and supports crèches, schools, senior and youth centres, programmes for the disabled, skills training and building initiatives.

It employs social workers, occupational therapists, community field workers, nurses, and teams of volunteers, and raises money all over the world to help disadvantaged people living in poverty in this country. There are retail outlets at the Waterfront in Cape Town, New York, Los Angeles, London, Australia, and Germany.

There are also Community Creations, which controls the products made by the organisation and sold for funds, Community Angels, carers who reach out to children who are unsupported and vulnerable, and Community Mamas, women who take children at risk under their wing.

There is a subtle difference to Lieberman's life's work that sets it apart. She prefers to inspire others, to help them help themselves. Simply raising money is not her chief ambition; instead, she seeks to use it to train, to teach and help those less fortunate improve their own skills, thereby enhancing their ability to lead fulfilled lives.

Community Creations began with startling simplicity. Lieberman realised no dolls of colour were being made in



PETER BILLS MEETS...

apartheid South Africa. All that South Africans could buy were white dolls with blonde hair and blue eyes.

"I said to myself, 'It's all right loving that if you're a little white girl, but if you were a black child, wouldn't you want a black doll?'"

The idea came to Lieberman through her attempts to help the people of the townships. She discovered that children were often being left to fend for themselves during the day, perhaps because their fathers were away and their mothers at work. People began to ask her for help and Lieberman set up an ad hoc child-minding service.

"But then we realised we needed something for the children to occupy themselves. There weren't any black dolls to be found so I decided to make some myself.

"I told my husband and he said: 'You are mad.'"

Depressingly, the apartheid police were soon suspicious of the white woman who was a regular visitor to Langa. They suspected she was an informer, engaged in subversive activities and often pulled her in. She remembers sitting in police vans, cuddling a little black baby who had been left alone all day by its mother. The reality of these injustices simply drove Lieberman forward.

But simply caring and assisting wherever she could was never her main goal. She dreamed of establishing centres where people could work and learn skills that would improve their situation. Incredibly, that dream began to unfold.

She taught them how to sew and people began to make some of their own clothes. Then disabled seniors were given job-creation skills. Others worked in fields they had never imagined could be within their remit.

"People took responsibility and did things themselves, and that is still our ethic. We work alongside as a nurturing, promoting, enabling umbrella body, allowing them to fulfil the needs of their own communities. We support a lot of the children within our preschools."



Helen Lieberman, founder of the NGO Ikamva Labantu, which helps people to help themselves.

She smiles, and sighs.

"Of course, had I known what it would grow into, I would never have started it. It is now a monster. It consumes everyone's lives. You certainly can't do this unless you are devoted to this South Africa and the concept of a better world for all South Africans.

"I believe this is something unique here because everyone is taking ownership. This is not an organisation about me or any other single person. So many people now play their part, it has become something everyone can feel part of."

Today, a staff of 125 help run the organisation from its Cape Town offices. Two blind women answer the telephones in the office are an example of the creed. Put simply, there is "a role for everyone".

In Gugulethu, they first found more than 50 blind people who, with the organisation's assistance, have become qualified aromatherapists, working in Kenilworth.

People have been taught computer skills and some have qualified as lawyers and social workers through the programmes put in place for them.

About 35 000 pre-school children are now cared for across South Africa by the organisation. This requires about 1 300 official carers. But there may be as many as 50 000 people assisting or working in some way for the organisation.

"We take in children who are unsupported and have thousands of children evolving in the system," says Lieberman. "People on the ground and professional staff all work together."



It was like looking into hell, Helen Lieberman says of her first experience of Langa township in Cape Town in the 1960s. And not much has changed since. In 2000, residents of Joe Slovo informal settlement in Langa watched their homes burn after a fire broke out late at night, destroying 300 shacks. The area is still desperately poor.

PICTURE LEON KNIPE

"These are the people who have made this a success, not me. I could not have done it without the input and the caring of so many ordinary, decent human beings. For this is very much a community run and owned organisation.

"That has been the common thread which has run right through the whole idea. You can't do all this without the support of community leaders and the local people. They have bought into this and they want to volunteer their time and services. We don't own the projects, they own them.

"The people are the backbone and builders of this country. Most are not acknowledged and are still given a terrible, raw deal. But if we don't have the goodwill of these people, what do we have?"

What does a woman like Lieberman think of today's politicians who live well

while so many still endure a daily nightmare in this country?

"Those that have been trusted are destroying Nelson Mandela's dream," she says. "I look at this ruling party and I see its demise. They have the wrong values. They haven't delivered and they don't know how to deliver. The leadership is really poor and in some cases corrupt. It is a disgrace - what are we teaching our children?"

Yet she remains confident about South Africa's future because, as she puts it, she is surrounded by so many caring, decent people prepared to give their time to help others.

"There is so much goodwill that has been given to us by so many people. Now, we are like one big team."

They have started to work with the government as Lieberman explains.

"They asked us to work with them, but

it has taken them a long time to understand the value of skills and the great possibilities of cementing partnerships with NGOs, people that have the experience. NGOs have accountability. We are transparent about what we do for we are accountable to our donors.

"It is sometimes difficult for people to get their heads around the diversity of our working with children, youths, families, seniors and the incapacitated such as blind people.

"Charity is the worst thing; you destroy people because you don't give them the ability to be self-sufficient. The biggest gift you can give people is the feeling of self-worth and the capacity to look after themselves. Our aim is to take people to the point where they can fly on their own. My biggest achievement is when I hear people say they don't need our organisation any more."