

Benjamin Generation Place of Safety a Community Development Blueprint

By Xabrina-Michel'li Thompson

“The life which you touch for good or for ill will touch another life, which will touch another life, until who knows when the trembling stops or in what far place your touch will be felt.” – Frederich Buechner

When he wrote those words Frederich Buechner could very well have been describing Benjamin Generation non-profit organization: - a unique “substitute home” of protective care, emotional support, love and learning for abused, abandoned and rejected children. A place where lives most certainly are touched for good and will, just as certainly, touch other lives, as they have mine, and through this article, hopefully yours. Who knows where the trembling will stop or in what far place those touches will ultimately be felt?

Benjamin Generation, notwithstanding the incredible work which they do for the children placed in their care by welfare and other governmental authorities receives no government, lotto, institutional or other financial assistance what-so-ever. Run on firm, deep rooted Christian ethics and principles. Benjamin Generation survives by the grace of God, the dedication and commitment of a small band of inspirational believers and supported by an equally small band of philanthropists.



You will find Benjamin Generation nestled in the quaint little KwaZulu-Natal Midlands town New Hanover amid rolling hills of sugar cane, timber plantations and sprawling, impoverished rural settlements. The unpretentious, immaculately maintained buildings scattered round the manicured property, belie the tragic circumstances that brought these little ones there in the first place. Rejected, abandoned. Even stabbed, burned and, believe it or not buried alive. Children who, were it not for Benjamin Generation would have a miserable existence of rejection, neglect, persecution and exploitation – never reaching their God given potential and becoming the flotsam and jetsam of a once proud nation which for centuries thrived on the support, protection and love of the close-knit extended family. That proud nation is now trying desperately to cope with the devastating combined forces of the impoverished legacy of apartheid and a modern, western, capitalistic society where family values are

rapidly declining. Benjamin Generation is not just their safety net but also their launching pad to a meaningful life.

The problem is huge. Statistics South Africa's most recent data, from the 2018 general household survey estimates that about 11.7% of children below the age of eighteen are orphans. This is more than 2,255,000 children. My home province of KwaZulu-Natal, being the most populous state in the country, alone has more than 660,000 orphaned children – and these are the official statistics. In a country such as South Africa with its vast semi-literate rural population there is little doubt that these figures are an understatement of the factual situation.

What is generally not appreciated is that the internationally accepted definition of an orphan – someone whose parents have died – is applied differently in South Africa. Here children whose parents cannot be traced are classified as orphans. It is here too that Benjamin Generation plays such a vital role in its tireless efforts to re-unite children with one or more of their biological parents or close relatives within the extended family.

Benjamin Generation being a registered non-profit organization operates in two capacities. Firstly, to rescue little ones with their Place of Safety, for children from 0-5 years old and secondly, to develop long term foster care homes for them. This is all part of their vision to establish life-long families through foster care by identifying couples who have the capacity to care for orphaned and abandoned children and raise them up to be well adjusted adults. In order to achieve this second objective Benjamin Generation has created a system of separate houses on the property for the children taken out of these abusive environments. These houses are run by “mothers” and “fathers” thereby creating tightly knit family units which give the children security and sense of belonging in as close to a normal family setting as possible.

Their vision is also to have a pre school on their property, not only for the children in the Place of Safety but also for the outside community, where children can get quality education in their formative years. This is something that is desperately needed in the area.



Rowen and Vanessa Wortmann transitioned into taking over the daily running of the Place of Safety over the past three years. Devoting their lives to the children of Benjamin Generation and giving selflessly. Benjamin Generation is truly changing lives and it is thanks to their in-house detective Vanessa herself that many families have been reunited with children thought to be lost forever. When children are placed in their care, Vanessa will go above and beyond to investigate each



case. Recently this resulted in a young boy being reunited with his biological mother, who had been searching for him for months. Because of Vanessa's indomitable will and passion, coupled with relentless phone calls and personal investigation, he was reunited with his biological mother whose life circumstances had changed drastically and was delighted to have her son back in her arms again. When Vanessa told this story and many others to me, I watched her come alive. She knew each child by name, every personality. She has a love for them and a hope for a much brighter future for each one. Rowen, Vanessa and their team are giving these children a sense of value they never had before, by providing them with unconditional love, undivided attention and an education. The children have learnt that they are loved, valued and will grow up knowing they are richer than they know.

It is this extra dimension of service and dedication that sets Benjamin Generation apart from state run, more "institutionalized" facilities where children, separated from their parents by poverty as opposed to death, generally speaking remain "institutionalized" until they reach a certain age and then in most cases put out into the world totally ill equipped, emotionally and educationally and with no, or precious little family or any other support structure. I have firsthand experience of the devastating effects which this institutionalization has on people. My maternal grandmother was institutionalized in a "white only" orphanage in Durban, South Africa during the apartheid era. Being a young Jewish girl who was illiterate and fluent in Zulu scared the staff and not knowing whether they had made a "mistake" they sent her to the "coloured only" orphanage. My grandmother never recovered from her institutionalization, resulting in multiple mental disorders. She became the tragic product of a tragic environment. My grandmother remained illiterate and due to the cycle of poverty my mother was institutionalized as well, with similar results. Had my grandmother been placed in a loving, homely environment such as Benjamin Generations Place of Safety and then fostered, I would not have been the first in my nuclear family to have matriculated and been the "first in the family" at many things that should have been routine. Its non-profit organizations like Benjamin Generation that work tirelessly to keep orphans out of institutions and with their families or a foster family, to give them the future they deserve.

The model upon which Benjamin Generation is being built is a blue print for the sustainable, balanced reintroduction of abused, abandoned and traumatized children into society. They deserve all the help and financial assistance they can get to develop and fine tune the product.

