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- Nicola Vernon

Educating the youth, saving the lives of farm animals and increasing food security. It's all in a day's work for Nicola Vernon, philanthropist and chairperson of the Greyton Transition Town.

WORDS: **SHELLEE-KIM GOLD**

What do you get when you combine an award-winning community activist who loves animals and the Earth, and for whom sustainability is not merely a fashion statement? You get Nicola Vernon, the dynamic and driven chairperson of the Greyton Transition Town (GTT) initiative.

Every project Nicky (as she's affectionately known in the picturesque Overberg town) and her team work on benefits the animals, people and Earth in her community.

And people are taking notice. The GTT's efforts were recognised at the Eco Logic Awards last year, where the team took home three awards for their contributions to the upliftment of Greyton. In addition to this, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) has confirmed the roll out of the team's ground-breaking Human Education (HE) system, and the town has been recognised as Africa's only official Transitional Town.

GTT's successfully implemented projects range from alternative building methods and food security to animal care, HE and waste reduction. While they may seem unrelated at first glance, every venture aims to provide sustainable solutions to everyday problems in Greyton, and create hope and prospects where there previously were none.

Philanthropy is in Nicola's blood; she's been running social development projects for decades, even receiving the award for Professional Fundraiser of the Year in the UK before moving to South Africa.

Focusing her energy on improving the situation in her new hometown was then a natural next step for the fundraiser.

PLASTIC PROHIBITED

Nicky's philosophy is to "tread this Earth lightly", and she walks her talk by living in a straw bale home on a farm that's completely off the grid. "To witness where the Earth was in the 1950s and where it is now is like watching a horror movie," says the GTT chair. She aims to make Greyton South Africa's first plastic bag-free town.

Nicola has been instrumental in getting locals to reduce their plastic bag usage, convincing many of the local shops to replace plastic carriers with GTT's long-life bags made from parachute material.

"We were able to reduce plastic bags from 50 000 to 10 500 monthly, but supermarkets in town faced almost violent resistant responses from customers when they ran trial plastic bag-free days," she explains. Besides reducing Greyton's plastic consumption, the project has also created employment for the three people who make the parachute bags.

BUILDING LIVES FROM LANDFILLS

A related win-win project involves some of the poorest community members collecting, sorting and cleansing waste that is then exchanged for points that can be used at GTT's swap shops.

Going hungry every night is now a thing of the past for around 450 local

families who benefit from the system. While swap shops can sometimes be nothing more than a hole in the wall, Nicola believes that it's important that customers feel dignity. "They're treated as though they're in a five-star store and get courtesy and consideration from our staff," says Nicola.

The shops stock everything from tinned and packet foods, to fresh produce. The families involved now enjoy up to three decent meals per week.

The landfill is also the site for South Africa's first Eco Brick building. The Green Park outdoor classroom, built from plastic bottles stuffed with waste and cemented with clay, is used for environmental lessons.

These initiatives have reduced waste drastically. So much so, that the Overberg municipality gave GTT free loan land with running water to allow them to continue the work.

HUMANE EDUCATION

All of these successes and awards haven't come easy. Nicola notes that before GTT, there was a phase where projects failed continuously. Puzzled as to the reason her hard work wasn't paying off, she kept mulling over the "why". "What I eventually realised was the root cause of all previous failed projects was due to people feeling worthless," she says.

And so, to tackle the problem at a grassroots level, Humane Education was born. HE is a holistic school programme that's aimed at children from



Nicola Vernon has played a pivotal role in encouraging Greyton residents to reduce their plastic bag usage.



the toughest and most impoverished backgrounds in the area.

“HE works by stimulating empathy in learners through the nurturing relationship they build with animals. Often they feel love and trust for the first time in their lives; this has a positive ripple effect into the community,” explains Nicola.

A reduction in truancy, bullying at school, and weekend alcohol and drug binges by the children are just some of the benefits that the programme has brought about. There’s also been an improvement in grades; more importantly, the children establish what acceptable treatment is – even from their parents.

“When the children begin respecting themselves, they are able to start setting boundaries with others, which is essential

for a healthy sense of self.” This self-esteem building approach has even been recognised by the Western Cape Education Department, which has stated that it intends to roll the programme out to 25 more schools in the Overberg this year.

ANIMAL SANCTUARY

If she had the luxury of free time, Nicola might spend it doing yoga or relaxing, but there’s seldom time for such indulgences. Instead, she spends her spare moments caring for the 160 rescued animals she shares her homestead with.

The animals come from all over the Western Cape; some were found

abandoned while others were being abused, but all live the high life at the Greyton Farm Animal Sanctuary. “Looking after my animals is a joy, not a job,” says Nicola, who wishes she could save all farm animals from the horrors of intensive agriculture.

One comes away from Nicola feeling a certain poetic rhythm. Varied as they are, each project is like an individual orchestral instrument, all working in concert to create a living symphony under Nicola’s conducting. □

Nicola’s success story

1996

Nicola wins the UK Fundraiser of the Year Award.

2014

Greyton is recognised by the global Transition Town Network as Africa’s first official Transition Town.

2015

Surrounding towns of Bot River and Swellendam visit Greyton to learn about the Transition Town model, while Napier starts implementing its own initiative.

2016

GTT, Nicola and Marshall Rinquest (GTT

co-director) walk away from the Eco Logic Awards as winners with the Eco Community award, Eco Angel award and Eco Youth award, respectively.

2017

The WCED confirms its intent to rollout Humane Education at 25 regional schools.