

Friday Files



By Gasant Abader

'O'NE word you never hear? It's a saying on the Cape Flats, from parent to child, you would have heard it at least once if you grew up there. It often means starting a week's worth of money and resources to take care of your household for a month.

Ashra Norton, the director and co-founder of Manenberg The Leadership College, lives with seven kids.

The Leadership College - a school not only known as TLC to its learners, staff and parents - had a 92 percent matric pass rate, with 67 percent bachelor passes.

Of the 71 distinctives Manenberg produced, 68 came from TLC.

But Dikshaad Adria caught the headlines with her seven distinctives.

'Dikshaad grew up with a single mother and absent father. She has a very beautiful story. She has a great grandmother, a grandmother and another - four generations - who live in the houses, right on top of the flats,' says a proud Ashra.

'She has two brothers and a sister who also started at our school last year. Her mother is a taxi driver on the Manenberg-Cheriton route. Dikshaad's great-grandmother does the odd bit of sewing, brings in money for food and holds the family together.

'The granny takes care of the children. The money goes to bring in what ever they need, like stationary. That is how those four ladies work together.

'When Dikshaad came to TLC she could say two words. Here we teach them public speaking. Our children can stand up in front of an audience of 500 to 1 000 and just speak off-the-cuff.'

Ashra's positivity on the eve of the first day of school belies a deep angst. She is in a speaking contest month ago to receive a vision notice because the rent is scheduled from R25 000 to R20 000 annually.

But she's looking forward. She shows me a hall that is hardly being converted into four additional classrooms for the 2017 intake.

The builders will work into the early morning of the first day of school to complete the task.

The school is a beacon of hope for a community war-torn with social challenges.

'When the matric results came out, the entire Manenberg was here to celebrate. And their children aren't even attending here. They ask, 'These are our leaders.'

'We believe all the children at this school are leaders. We believe, for South Africa to succeed, the majority must be in leadership positions because they feed the pain of the people that are struggling.'

Perhaps Ashra's confidence that the school will endure despite the threat of a eviction is because her own story is so similar to Dikshaad's and the circumstances of every learner at this school.

TLC opened its doors in 2010. It is registered as a private school so the deposit must pay for 60 percent of what it would cost to keep a child at a public school.

But TLC is by no means conventional. Even though it falls into the same category as a Bishop, Maria or St Cyprian, it is a very far school.

The school started with 47 learners and three teachers and went from two classes for Grade 8 to six classes for Grade 8 in 2017. In the next three years it is anticipating having the 1 000 it aims at.

In case of its success, there are now six other TLC schools in a row like Michelle Plain and Obsonomy and a



ACHIEVER: Ashra Norton, the founder of the Leadership Academy in Manenberg, in one of the classrooms at the school. Her school has produced excellent matric results in spite of concerns over possible eviction from the premises.

PICTURE: KASO PERERA

Ashra reimagines Manenberg - with a big dose of TLC

partnership is on the cards in Longa.

Each child receives a bursar and full uniforms at no cost to the families, there is a feeding scheme, and psychologists and home-support staff, like occupational therapists, work pro bono.

Teachers have often taken sabbaticals to go to high school or TLC and the district school principal, Yusuf Akha, who has worked abroad, has at times gone without a pay.

Ashra has had to contend with such challenges her entire life. Her family still lives in Manenberg and she lives just two minutes from the school.

The grandmother of four has persuaded two of her three children and her son-in-law to teach at TLC and she has her husband's full support.

'Because I was born and bred in Manenberg I know about the younging, especially by the children and the youth. We have brilliant children in this community and they have big dreams.'

'Every year I attend the award ceremony for Grade R. You ask the six five-year-olds what they would like to be one day and you hear the dreams: a doctor, a pilot... really innovative in their thinking.'

'But then 13 years after that, you speak to the same children, or you see them dragged in the road. Something happened and I think our community is falling over children.'

'When I was a child in Manenberg I attended Silvestra and Primary and Silverstream High and my dream was to be a pharmacist. But in the 1980s if you were a non-white, you could not be a teacher, nurse or a social worker. I chose teaching as a career and, in my first year of studies, I had to do an assignment on gangsterism and drugs.'

'We were seven children - five sisters and two brothers - living in a two-bedroom flat, with a small kitchen of 2m x 2m and the rooms the same size. My father got very ill and my mother raised us on a disability and maintenance grant.'

'My mother was very strict because, at that time, the gangs were already around. The gangs started in Manenberg because families had been pushed out. We were from District Six and at that time the

government would say here's a key and this is your new home in Manenberg. We were among the very first families who moved in 1996 when Manenberg was established - 50 years last year.'

'My mother said you're not going to do your own work (for the assignment) in the library in Athlone or Cape Town with public transport. We had no car or such luxuries. We grew up very tough on R19 a month to raise seven children.'

'She was a housewife who had no education. She always wanted me to leave school at primary level. I never knew why.'

'When I passed matric and I was accepted to do pharmacy she said: 'Can you now understand why I didn't want you to go to high school? I knew I was going to disappoint you because we won't have money to send you for your studies.'

'For the assignment she said: 'Why do you want to go to Athlone? You'll have to take a taxi and it's unsafe. Sincerely, I'll have to find money for your bus but in you know the people in Manenberg go and interview those guys.'

'Every day when I think back, I can now see the wisdom. I realised interviewing those guys that, irrespective of what they were doing, 99 of out 100 percent of them were driven by circumstances.'

'They yearned to be leaders, not they were so positive in their lives, no role models, no opportunities. They became leaders by hook or by crook.'

Gangs and drugs are a daily reality for the children who attend TLC. But inside its walls is a safe haven. When gang violence shut schools in Manenberg for at least a fortnight last year, Ashra kept TLC open.

'I'll show you the spot that where the war was for the two gangs, where the Americans and the Hard Livings fought it out. That is now where we have about 14 classrooms. We have a psycho-social therapist at the school. We have occupational therapists, psychologists and social workers that work with the children and the families as well.'

'Just a week before school closed we had a false and-son-a-thorn. The dark came and we got a them break fast and came just to I their some 'I love you' some tall fathers' I love you.'

'You heard a 50-year-old dad say: 'This is the first time in my life I'm crying in front of my son. In this community, a man can't cry. You have to be hard. We tell them it's okay to cry - you have a heart, you're a human being.'

'It was just so heart-warming to see dad hugging the son, hugging and saying: 'I love you, my son. I really believe in you.' These little things are game-changers. 'We also have churches and youth groups that give extra classes for accounting and physics and maths - not only for our learners, but for all learners in Manenberg.'

'Our school is a social hub. The community who live around here help to paint, cut the lawn. Everybody gets involved when we do something here.'

'The children know we believe in them. We care and we love them. These three words we hold very high at this school. We build a very strong school culture and we have our own protocols.'

'At events, the national anthem must be sung and the school song must be sung. We give them a sense of identity and belonging that they don't have at home. This is why you'll have children here till 6pm.'

'At 7pm on a Saturday they'll knock on the caretaker's door to sit under the tree to watch the birds. They bring their books and they read because at home there's nothing.'

'They live in the 2m x 2m Wendy houses where they can't even walk at night up into the second floor. There's no food, there's no water, no dad... They come here and feel tranquility and peace. They're happy when they're not told tuition and about: 'Yippee. We can't go to school with you because you're not doing well.'

'We tell our children that they're more safe at school than facing the staybullet at home. At home there's no supervision. If you're going to have guns in your house you're going to go to the window. When you're here, you're safe.'

'We have a feeding scheme and I tell the teachers all the time that you can't ask a child for homework, you will have to get maths marks into their mind if they didn't get for two days. The only thing they see in front of them is a sandwich.'

He looks at the teacher and can't lose the teacher. They see a slice of bread.

'But I insist that we maintain people's dignity. I don't like soup kitchens where people have to stand in line. We do it very discreetly.'

'We make the sandwiches, give it to the class teacher and they'll serve to those children in... They'll slip the sandwiches into the children's bags as if it comes from home. We also have people who offer lunch, like two pots of food.'

'How does one bottle and replicate TLC's success? It excels at maths and science with no lab and classes that at times are taught under the trees or in the kitchen area. There is no quick fix or silver bullet. It is hard work, determination and surviving against extraordinary odds.'

'You must remember if you see matric results at TLC, it's not like in the office at home where there are tutors. Not one of our children can go for extra tuition because they don't have the money. It's just the teacher.'

'What we have is a very strong intervention programme in the school starting from Grade 8. Every Saturday is maths day at TLC. Everybody must come in school uniforms. There is no other day for physics.'

'I want the education department to say: 'Mrs Norton, here are 10 free premises, put up 10 Leadership Colleges - in Hanover Park, Netong, Bonthorpe and elsewhere. But we need premises. With that little money the department gives us we can do it with the budget.'

Ashra has incredible resolve, she is committed to changing the story in the area where she was born and raised.

'I can only prosper if my family is happy and I can only do what I do if they understand what I'm doing. The good things that my husband is able from Manenberg. He understands my journey.'

'My concern for this community is great because I feel the pain. I come from this area... I was born here, I was bred here. The school that was my school in my matric year was then the best-performing school in this circuit. It's now the worst-performing school and the way to close it down. That is very sad and we need to change that.'