

# Educational outreach programme empowers young South Africans to change the world

The Penreach outreach programme works tirelessly, wielding the weapon of education to ensure that South Africa's youth are given the tools to change their lives and the world. Andile Ncontsa shares the story behind this successful initiative with our editor, Mark Pettipher



Andile Ncontsa, Chief Executive Officer of Penreach NPC

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**E**ducation is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world," said Nelson Mandela – and everything Penreach does is an endorsement of that philosophy. SAPOA shares this philosophy through its education programmes by promoting property as a career.

SAPOA has teamed up with Penreach on their career days to reach a number of schools and scholars from previously disadvantaged areas to share information on property as a career, as well as, handing out bursary application forms for the SAPOA bursary schemes.

Andile Ncontsa a former Chief Executive Officer of the Old Mutual Foundation, is now Chief Executive Officer of Penreach NPC. "I've always had a dream to contribute, to pay my dues to society, to spend five years of my life contributing to something that is of great concern to me – the status of the education system in South Africa," he says. "This led to my involvement in the Penreach."

Penreach operates from a central base at Penryn College in Nelspruit and shares the college's resources. Penreach is determined to change the lives of young South Africans in the significantly under-resourced and disadvantaged communities of Mpumalanga, Limpopo and Northwest Province through diverse, quality education initiatives at all levels.

"Education is the basis for skills development," says Ncontsa. "We need young people to study maths and science, especially at high-school level, to secure the kind of graduates required by industry and business – actuaries, economists, accountants. These are key skills in society, and we aim to propagate them."

"It is not just about education and the right skills – it's about a holistic approach to education, part of what we do involves sport and arts and culture. We share the centres of excellence at Penryn College with the community schools with which we work and with the Department of Arts and Culture, where we play a big role at provincial level in promoting the choir and the exchange of college students as well as our community school choirs, through participation in the various competitions."

## What does it mean to have SAPOA come on board?

"It's a fantastic opportunity for Penreach and for SAPOA," says Ncontsa. "One of Penreach's critical strategic areas is to broaden our stakeholder group, our partners, in the work that we do. We don't only see it as people contributing funds to what we do – we see strategic relationships. For instance, the Riverside Park development in which the whole school is involved has adopted some of the programmes, such as our toy library programme. They recently held a fun run to raise funds for the building of a toy library in an informal settlement close to their community. That is the type of richness of relationship that matters to us. It's not just SAPOA – although this type of education drive is becoming relevant to SAPOA – but with all our stakeholders and customers."

## A passion for education, training and skills development

Training and skills development are Ncontsa's passions, and he champions and lives out former president Nelson Mandela's dedication and commitment to education.

"A while ago, I spent five years working on a special presidential project in the East Rand during the time that area was destroyed in the lead-up to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994," he says. "Conflict between the ANC and self-defence units, as well as the IFP and the ISD, saw infrastructure being destroyed. The East Rand became a no-go area. Nelson Mandela and Jay Naidoo tasked us not only to build the infrastructure but also the people. We worked on developing housing and the roads; on building police stations, community halls, sporting facilities and even cemeteries; and on integrating what was called "the lost generation" – 17-to-18-year-olds who had no chance in life and had missed out on getting an education. I was responsible for finding opportunities to equip them with skills for part-time work and to aid them to study part-time to obtain their matric. Now, some of them are in the SAPS,

and some are in the Ekurhuleni metro and the Tshwane metro. There were about 2 500 young people involved in that conflict, and we were able to successfully place them one way or another. I was given a special award by Nelson Mandela for my efforts and achievements in this project.

"This focus is part of what Penreach does today. The most critical thing for me is seeing the fruit of one's labour – not for myself but for the young people who were going in the wrong direction or had no direction. Being able to steer them to take a more positive direction has been the most rewarding. To see young people with no hope in life find a path for themselves augurs well for the future.

"When it comes to education, I always say that we are not building scientists or engineers, or creating doctors, but we are creating responsible human beings who will become responsible parents, who in turn will impart that responsibility and citizenship to their own children, thereby ensuring success. As the adage says, 'It takes a village to raise a child'"

### Starting at grassroots level

"Our aspiration for the work we do is to start from conception – but we are not there yet, as the most critical time of a child's development is the first 1 000 days," says Ncontsa. "But we start work during early childhood development (ECD) by providing qualifications for all ECD practitioners.

"We work with a number of ECD centres to train the practitioners and mentor them on how to operate an effective ECD centre. The current issue in South Africa is not so much access to early childhood learning, it's the quality that we are grappling with – the quality of early childhood development. Skilling people in that area is critical. As you may know, early childhood development has been identified as one of the critical components of the National Development Plan (NDP), so the work we do starts from there and goes on to the next level – what we call the 'foundation phase' at primary school. At that level, we concentrate on numeracy and literacy.

"Several studies have indicated that learner achievement in Grade 4 is the predictor of what is going to happen in Grade 12. Thus we put a lot of emphasis and effort on that rather than concentrating on the Grade 12s. If you catch them at the foundation level and ensure the building blocks of numeracy and literacy are in place, you can predict Grade 12 outcomes. We also have a slightly lesser

involvement in mentoring in the more senior phases, concentrating on maths and science.

"The third component of what we do is leadership. We encourage leadership. We work with the school principals and the school management teams as well as heads of department to drive a vision for excellence in leadership, managing the curriculum and the system, planning for success, ensuring that the school has a teacher and children in the classroom, and that everyone is playing their part."

### Are South African rural families more stable now?

"I think the rural space is actually less stable than it was before – not in a negative way, but in a positive way," says Ncontsa. "This is especially true in places such as Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, where there were strong traditional leadership roles, but where there is now a democratic system of local government. At this stage, the two have not effectively gelled. Communities in the rural space are more aware of their rights, and they are not afraid to take action and stand up for their rights. In certain instances, like in Limpopo where schools have been burnt, it has been done irresponsibly – and while this is unacceptable, at least the communities are standing up. I believe that it's a transition that will inform and evolve some kind of democratic social economic system.

"I believe in the saying 'the better the education of the mother, the better the education of the child'. Of the people attending our Saturday teacher development workshops, almost 90% are women – women who are running ECD centres, women who are being trained to become ECD practitioners and teachers, and female teachers in the foundation phase of primary school. They have such passion for their own self-development, and they are motivated. So yes, it takes a village to raise a child – but it's the villagers who win.

"The trend where the family unit was split because of the men going to seek work elsewhere is lessening. There are fewer people leaving to work in the mines now, so you actually have more young men unemployed in the communities. The problem now is not the absent male but a present male who is not really present in the sense that he is unemployed, and feels undervalued because he is not playing a role or adding value. This leads to some of the risky behaviour we find in society. But no-one can ever say it was better before than it is now. It has never been this great to be a South African.

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### From humble beginnings

Andile Ncontsa's own education started in Cala in the Eastern Cape, in a mud school with no electricity. After he finished primary school, his family moved to East London. He completed his secondary education in Alice after being shot and detained during the 1985 uprising.

He went on to study at and graduate from Wits University with a BCom in finance and philosophy. He has completed several short courses in marketing, project management, communication and media, and is an alumnus of the University of Cambridge's Business & The Environment Programme.

There are more opportunities available; what is required is to skill people and change their mind-set. With 36% of the people who should be working and productive being unemployed, the story of intergenerational poverty becomes a reality.

"If a child has a father who has never had a job, and that father is raising the child, that child does not have a reference point of what it is like to be a working parent. This gives you an idea of what is going to happen in the next generation.

"At Penreach, we put the focus on that child. We do everything we possibly can to catch them at inception and give them the foundations of a quality education, while also supporting those who are involved in their education, partnering with the Department of Education and the Department of Social Development to make sure that we arrest future long-term unemployment."

Ncontsa references the story of Thandi, which forms parts of narrative of the National Development Plan. It effectively says, "If we do nothing to educate Thandi from Khayelitsha or Bushbuckridge or anywhere in our country, if we don't do something about the quality of her education at the beginning of her life, the only job Thandi will have is as a maid, and the only time she will earn a living wage is when she receives a state pension."

"That's the gravity of the situation," he says. "The only time an uneducated person will have a living wage is when they claim a state pension. And, of course, the taxpayers cannot be expected to maintain that. This is why partnerships with corporates and institutions such as SAPOA are critical for us to arrest that cycle from the beginning – otherwise we are all going to pay for it, one way or another. The best place to make an investment is right at the beginning. That's what we are doing at Penreach – taking the long-term approach, rather than doing what has been done for the past 22 years, where the emphasis was on matric results, which have no relevance to the success of this nation. It's the Grade 4 results that tell us what will happen in matric. Less than 50% of learners who start Grade 1 complete matric. There is high access to education in the foundation and primary phases, but in Grades 8 and 9, we lose children as they drop out of the system, leaving them with no prospects. If less than 50% of learners continue until matric, what percentage will complete a higher education qualification? It is these learners that we must be concerned

about, before they become part of the 8,9-million unemployed and unemployable.

"It is a serious but fantastic challenge. When we understand the nature of the challenge, it becomes easier to know what to do. If we ask the right questions, we will start getting the right answers. I think we've been asking the wrong questions all along. 'Why are our matric results not what they are supposed to be?' is the wrong question.

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The right questions are in fact, 'Why are the Grade 4 results not what they are supposed to be?', 'Why are 29% of Grade 5 learners still illiterate after five years of learning?', 'Why are about 76% of Grade 5 children unable to answer a simple Grade 2-level mathematical question?' First, they cannot read or comprehend the sentence, and second, they can't do sums because they can't read.

"I think the country is moving in the right direction, and corporates are beginning to understand that quick-fix solutions are not actually going to help. What is needed is an investment in property – and a long-term investment, not just for today. We have to be there for the long haul, for 18 years of a child's development, and the bulk of our investment has to go towards the beginning stages of his or her development. That's where we will find a return on our investment.

"For example, we have a mobile lab at Penreach College to promote science because many of our schools don't have a science lab (and those that do have no equipment or materials). We take our mobile lab to ECD centres because a three-year-old needs to know what a scientist looks like

and what that scientist does. They can readily relate to a scientist as a person wearing a coat and doing experiments, although it is more about visual effects and creating awareness around safety and fire. That's where you build their thinking skills and expose them to opportunities.

"So, we start at that level; then, in Grade 4, we say it is important for you to be doing arithmetic because it's linked to those opportunities and employment – not only as an employee but also as an artisan or an entrepreneur creating employment.

### Ensuring long-term benefits

"Our motto at Penreach is 'Educational excellence for one and all South Africans,'" says Ncontsa. "The various programmes we offer benefit more than half a million children in the public education system, and the work we do at school level directly benefits the scholars at Penreach College. And what we are doing for one of those children at Penreach College, we are doing for any other child in the education system for the overall long-term benefit of the country.

"Our programmes focus on ensuring that the children of today are not going to follow the same path as their parents. We are not here to solve today's problems; we are here to solve the next generation's problems. If the current generation's children are given hope and education, they will have opportunities – and our investment at grassroots level will have paid off."

### Largest outreach programme in southern Africa

Founded in 1991, Penreach is the largest outreach programme in southern Africa. It focuses on core interventions to address South Africa's educational challenges. It is a major catalyst for improving the quality of education from early childhood through to matric, starting at daycare centres and following the same learners through to primary phase and high school.

Self-funded, Penreach relies on social investment partnerships to reach its beneficiaries and make an impact on the targeted education landscape.

Through several projects in 2015, Penreach had a direct impact on:

- 332 schools
- 430 principals
- 8 680 teachers
- 267 993 learners
- 10 488 parents

# Changing their world through education

Meet the dedicated team of professionals behind Penreach, southern Africa's largest non-governmental organisation that's wholly committed to uplifting a cluster of disadvantaged communities in Mpumalanga through diverse, quality education initiatives

**"E**ducation is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world," said Nelson Mandela, and everything Penreach does is an endorsement of that philosophy. Penreach is determined, via education at all levels, to change the lives of South Africans in the under-resourced and disadvantaged communities of Ehlanzeni, Bohlabela, Bushbuckridge and Nkangala in Mpumalanga.

Since 1991, Penreach has been providing quality educational interventions to learners, teachers and school leaders. As the largest NGO in the southern hemisphere, Penreach is a major catalyst for improving the quality of education from early childhood through to matric. Its interventions are strategically selected to ensure quality education starts at daycare centres and follows the same learners through to primary phase and high school.

Self-funded, Penreach relies on social investment to reach its beneficiaries. Penreach has focused its efforts on core interventions to address the educational challenges. It achieves its goals with a layered approach, recognising that in underprivileged communities weaknesses lie at every level of the education system. Every aspect needs attention to achieve a quality outcome. The cornerstones of Penreach's initiatives include developing quality early childhood development (ECD) practitioners with holistic child development initiatives; increasing professional development and pedagogical content knowledge of teachers; increasing academic learner performance; and empowering school leadership to effectively run schools. In essence, the Penreach model is based on its three core areas of impact: ECD, teacher development and learner support, and management and leadership development. The latter programme is designed to fast-track development of critical skills required by school principals and their management teams.

Although Penreach works predominantly within rural schools, it does so from a central base at Penryn College in Nelspruit. The voluntary Saturday workshops for teachers take place here. Services are shared with

Penryn College, enabling Penreach to focus on its core business of teacher development and learner performance. Teachers and learners either travel to Penreach, or are served by local "cluster" activities in the 15 000km<sup>2</sup> rural areas.

- At least 1 400 educators from more than 600 schools attend Penreach annually.
- Penreach reaches between 300 000 and 500 000 learners indirectly each year.
- Through several projects in 2015, Penreach had a direct impact on 332 schools, 430 principals, 8 680 teachers, 267 993 learners and 10 488 parents.

Penreach's impact on the targeted education landscape is substantial, with innumerable ongoing initiatives supported by Penreach's partners. There are many CSI opportunities for co-funding with each of the Penreach projects; those who get involved are given impactful branding opportunities.

The Penreach Mobile Science Laboratory in the Ehlanzeni District is one example – 5 800 learners from 0 to 18 years benefit. The cost of science equipment and materials, along with a lack of teaching skills, has not only hampered learner performance but also any enthusiasm towards related career opportunities. The Mobile Science Laboratory programme has given learners the opportunity to interact with science through practice. Teachers can book the lab to enable classes to complete prescribed practical science experiments while building their own confidence and skills in presenting these classes with the correct resources.

Science shows are conducted at ECD centres and schools, and in communities. The initial start-up costs per lab is R500 000 – with annual operational costs starting at R500 000, depending on the number of schools. Penreach currently operates two labs with the support of its partners: the Department of Science and Technology, SAASTA, Vodacom, Export Credit Insurance Company and Bayer South Africa.

The Mobile Book Banks and Reading Camps is another powerful initiative, volunteer-driven with a current target audience of 1 620 children aged six to 10. These beneficiaries are currently served by 62 Penreach Reading Camps.

Part of the integrated approach to successful early literacy is to increase the availability and use of reading materials in the classroom, home and community through mobile Book Camps and Reading Camps. Community members open up their garages, homes and gardens to host groups of up to 30 children on weekday afternoons for extra reading opportunities. Initially intended as a two-days-per-week programme, most Reading Camps operate five days a week. The initial setup cost of R2 500 per Reading Camp includes the cost of volunteer training, an initial Penreach Book Bank, and other reading resources. Annual costs amount to R1 000 per camp. The current 62 camps are funded locally by organisations such as TRACN4 as well as national CSI. As a CSI opportunity, an additional 50 camps can be added immediately, serving another 1 500 children, at a cost of R125 000 with an annual support grant of R50 000 thereafter.

Penreach Teacher Development workshops indirectly affect 70 000 learners. The Saturday workshops have been an institution at Penreach for more than 20 years, developing and empowering teachers and ECD practitioners with skills and knowledge. They furthermore serve as a platform for sharing, learning from one another, networking and socialising, and also assist with practical skills development among teachers from Grade 00 to Grade 9. Attendance is voluntary, and teachers come from far and wide to attend what are considered "legendary" classes.

Current partners for these workshops include Transnet Foundation, Barloworld Trust, RCL Foods and ApexHi. The cost to deliver in-service training to 1 500 educators is R1,4-million per year, and numerous sponsorship or funding opportunities from R250 000 exist.

The dedicated professionals at Penreach are driven by their credo, "Educational excellence for one and all South Africans". They work tirelessly to wield the weapon of education, breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty so that thousands upon thousands of young South Africans are given the tools to thrive – and ensure a South Africa where we do not have 8,9-million unemployed citizens.