‘ Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did.

# Dr Louise Van Rhyn

**WRITER** Lee-Anne Richards

"Louise is a firebrand! No hurdle is too great, no task too complicated. When someone combines, in equal measure, passion, vision, enthusiasm, judgment and follow-through, the world shifts. Louise van Rhyn is a living commitment to shifting the world." Ben Zander, Leadership Guru & Conductor, Boston Philharmonic.

This quote says it all – the words possibility and active citizenship is part of this icon's vocabulary. She strives to show us how to embrace the much needed change that society needs to go through in order to pass on a positive legacy to those that may still come. Let us introduce you to Louise Van Rhyn.

**WHO IS LOUISE VAN RHYN?**

Louise Van Rhyn was born in Malawi - moved to South Africa and grew up in the Eastern Transvaal. She studied at the University of Stellenbosch in psychology and computer science. She had a great love for computer science and it was her focus area. Her first 8 years after university she spent on IT and Project Management. She was interested to find out the impact of technological change on the sense of identity, the psychological impact on people and that led her to become interested in change management. She went to the United Kingdom in 1989 as part of an international company implementing computer systems for hospitals.

She came back to South Africa in 1992 to do her MBA at the University of Stellenbosch. In 1998 she went back to the UK with her family to work on a global SAP implementation for a pharmaceutical organisation. This led to Ashridge Consulting, where she focused on organizational development due to her interest in human beings in organizations. Whilst in the UK she did a Doctorate in Change Management at the University of Hertfordshire. Her family missed South Africa and they came back in 2003. She struggled to find her feet in South Africa and found herself commuting between South Africa, France and the UK. This meant cycles of 10 days in South Africa, 10 days traveling. At the time she managed to look after the change aspects of a large-scale change project for Wyeth Pharmaceuticals across 17 countries in Europe.

In August of 2007, she decided that commuting did not really work for her and her family and she "had to find a way to arrive in South Africa", as she aptly puts it. When she started to search for a learning community of Organisational Development practitioners and could not find any, she started the South African Organisational Development Network (SAODN) in November 2007. This was part of her "arriving in SA" and making a meaningful contribution to the field of Organisational Development.

Through her Doctoral studies, she discovered that social change happens when the stories and conversations change. As a passionate South African, who had just returned to South Africa, she became concerned about the negative stories about South Africa that were being told and re-told so she asked Ben Zander, the world renowned conductor and speaker on transformation and leadership, to help. In 2008 her company organized 97 events that enabled Ben & Roz Zander to interact with 13,000 people over 21 days. The purpose of the Zander's tour was to change the conversations in South Africa from downward spiral conversations to conversations of possibility. The work with the Zanders helped Louise and her business partners to establish Symphonia Leadership Development and Symphonia for South Africa.

**WHAT IS SYMPHONIA?**

The name Symphonia comes from a term in Ben and Rosamund Zander's Book, "The Art of Possibility." Symphonia meaning, the sounding together of all the voices. Symphonia's mission is to strengthen the fabric of South African society and they do that through the work that they do with leaders in organizations as well as the work that they do with citizens and communities. Symphonia Leadership Development's vision is to ignite thinking and leadership at all levels in the organization and to bring back joy and vibrancy into organizations. Symphonia for South Africa is a registered NPO and

they are focused on citizen engagement and community mobilization. The two Symphonia organisations are uniquely placed to straddle civil society and business. The organization is staffed by 8 fulltime personnel and a large network of facilitators and consultants. The criteria for employment are "people who stand in possibility, has zest for life and is passionate about their contribution."

In 2009 Louise became a champion for the Dinokeng Scenario's – 3 possible futures for South Africa. There are 3 which are: Walk Apart; Walk Behind; Walk Together. Louise committed the next 10 years of her life to make the Walk Together scenario a reality in South Africa. She and uses the Dinokeng message as a way to ignite citizen engagement and mobilize communities. During the last 6 months Symphonia for South Africa has been actively involved in igniting citizenship and building capacity in the field of community building. They have partnered with Peter Block, author of "Community: The Structure of Belonging" and internationally-recognized expert in the field of community building to host a series of community building workshops across South Africa. So far, more than 600 people have attended the workshops and have joined the "Network of Community Builders for South Africa".

Symphonia for South Africa has also launched a project called "School at the Centre of Community" (S@CC) where they are seeking to make the "Walk Together" scenario a reality around schools – getting all the stakeholders around a school together so that they can take responsibility for the future of our children, rather than abdicate responsibility of raising our children to the education department. This project provides the opportunity for business leaders to become 'thinking partners' to school principals and supporting school principals in their task to engage and mobilize community involvement. The "School at the Centre of Community" project was launched in March this year and there are currently 10 schools participating in the pilot phase. The vision is to use the S@CC methodology to assist a large percentage of the 27,000 underperforming schools in South Africa by creating opportunities for business, government and civil society to collaborate in a meaningful way around one of the key issues facing our nation.

## YOUR DEVELOPMENT AND NOMINATIONS

Louise did the Common Purpose Meridian Leadership Course in 2009 for the purpose of getting out of her comfort zone of working purely with commercial organization. She discovered the value of crossing boundaries and was challenged to lead beyond her authority due to this programme. She found this programme to be a hugely enriching experience.

## NOMINATIONS AND AWARDS

HR leadership Award – Global HRD Forum in India (Feb 2009), Won the Feather Award for entrepreneurial women in March 2009, Nominated in the Social Entrepreneurial category – Business Women Association. Louise feels more comfortable as a practitioner and does not enjoy the limelight much. She also believes that through all of these nominations, she becomes the face of the organization and her achievements are a reflection of her team, their recognition and acknowledgement of work done. She believes that what you do should have and add value.

## THINGS THAT MAKES HER PROUD

Louise's daughter, 12 year old Helen, is a Junior Ambassador for the Chaeli Campaign. It is a NGO started by kids to facilitate mobility devices to needy kids. Helen also established her own project called "Kidz 2 Kidz". The project collects toys, stationery and books and makes it available to less fortunate kids. For Helen's 12th birthday, her guests were told not to bring her any presents but bring a contribution in an envelope. They took 6 kids from the Rainbow Home for vulnerable children to Build-a-Bear to build their own bears. This was the gift to herself.

## WHAT ARE HER HOBBIES?

She cycled in the Argus senior race as a Chaeli Rider (raising funds for the Chaeli Campaign), Scuba diving with her family, Introvert – likes to curl up with a book and read

## HER THOUGHTS ON THE 2010 SOCCER WORLD CUP

After reading the book, "Playing the enemy" and seeing the film Invictus inspired unity, she believes that this is wonderful opportunity for South Africa and we have to be fully immersed and making the most of it. It is an opportunity and a special year with more energy.

## WHAT ARE THE LEGACIES THAT SHE WOULD LIKE TO LEAVE BEHIND?

That she has facilitated community building and that she assisted to strengthen the public of South Africa. That her kids are able to strive, due to their sense of identity.