



“Could we change the national conversation in South Africa from a downward spiral of doom and gloom to a conversation of possibility?”

# Don't wait for a hero, be one

## Dr Louise van Rhyn returned to SA to do just that

**D**r Louise van Rhyn laughs when she says that her passion about the future of this country has been described as “missionary zeal”. But make no mistake: her convictions are backed by a steely intellect that is perhaps why her vision is so compelling.

Dr van Rhyn is highly respected in the field of corporate change management, leadership and organisational development. She has a BSc and MBA from Stellenbosch University and a doctorate in Organisational Change from the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom. She is a founding member of the South African Organisational Development Network and the Academy for Organisational Change.

She has won several awards, most recently an international award for social entrepreneurship from the organisers of the global Corporate Responsibility Day held on 18 February.

Dr van Rhyn grew up in South Africa in a conservative Afrikaans family. After gaining her degree in Computer Science and Psychology, she left for London in 1989.

Most of her career, which spans more than 20 years, has been spent working around the world for blue chip companies in the UK, Europe, United States, Canada, Australia and the East.

In 2004, she was at the top of her corporate game in the UK when her family decided to

return to South Africa. It was their children who influenced this decision. They found that when returning to London after holidays in South Africa, there was a noticeable change in the behaviour of their two young daughters: they seemed to yearn for their roots.

“Our children called us to come back to this country, but when we did, we found the conver-

of belonging, and I needed to make South Africa home again,” she adds.

Her thinking has been strongly influenced by Benjamin and Rosamund Zander, authors of the book, *The Art of Possibility*. She began to wonder: “Could we change the national conversation in South Africa from a downward spiral of doom and gloom to a conversation of possibility?”

“Our children called us to come back to this country... people thought we were crazy to leave our comfortable life overseas.”

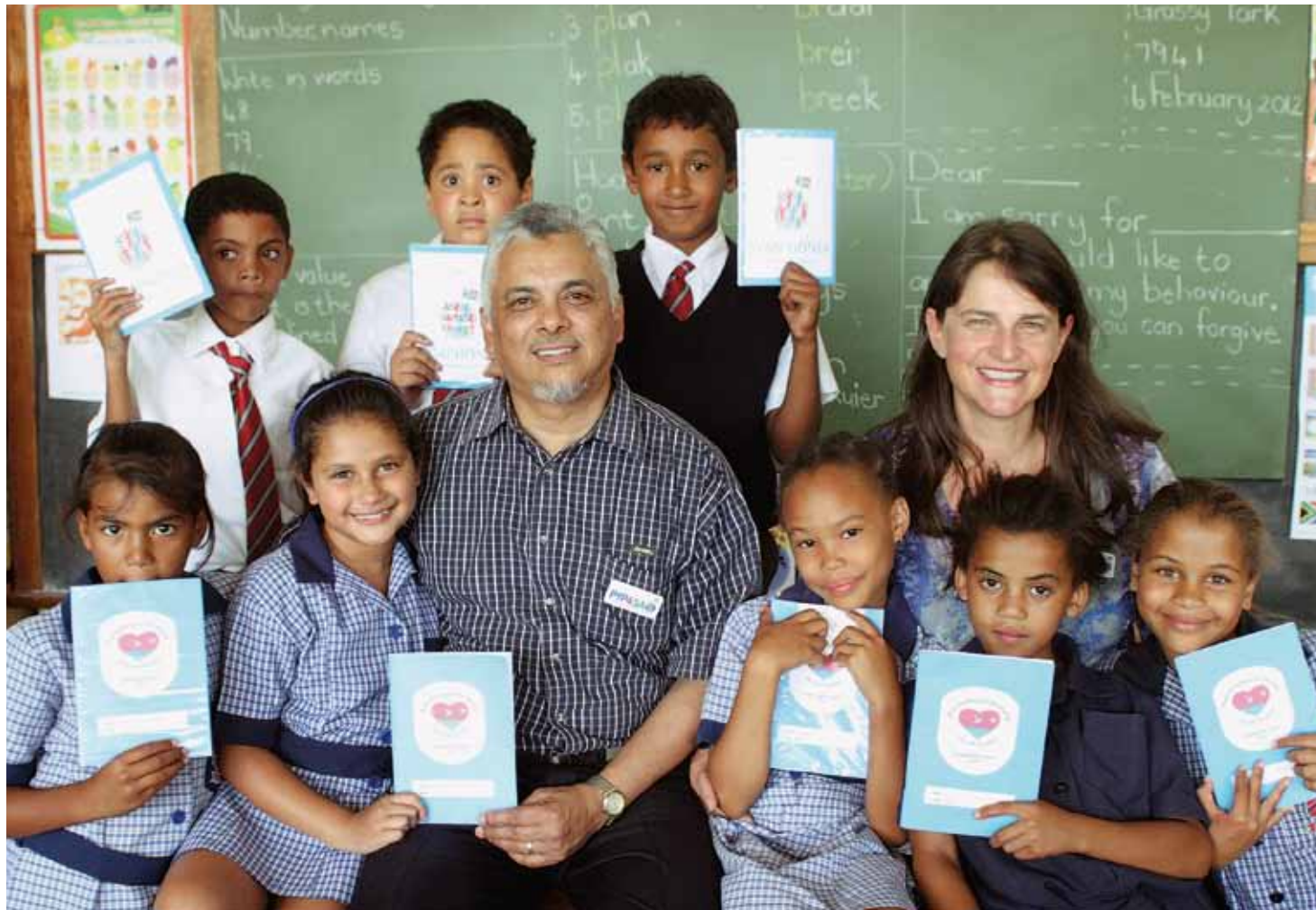
sations about South Africa so negative. People thought we were crazy to leave our comfortable life overseas,” she relates.

Dr Van Rhyn found that the field of organisational development had all but disappeared here and she was forced to commute constantly to Europe to work – a lifestyle that became unsustainable. “I also think part of the reason was that I couldn't find ‘home’. I was a gypsy with no sense

In 2008, Dr Van Rhyn invited the Zanders to talk in South Africa, and their positive message had a profound impact on thousands of people.

Symphonia (a term used by the Zanders, meaning “the sounding together of voices”) is a group of companies launched by Dr Van Rhyn, which is involved in organisational and societal change practice. One of them is a registered non-profit organisation named Symphonia for





Dr Louise van Rhyne with principal Ridwan Samodien at Kannemeyer Primary School in Grassy Park, Cape Town

South Africa. "Its vision is to strengthen the fabric of South African society," she explains.

In May 2009, Dr Van Rhyne had a "Damascus moment" when the Dinokeng Scenarios were released. The Dinokeng team looked at possible future scenarios for South Africa, and the outcome of their deliberations were three scenarios: Walk Together, Walk Apart, or Walk Behind.

"I felt that the Walk Together scenario was the only possible future for us and I wanted to help make it work. It calls for corporate and civil society to work together and I realised that my whole life, my training and business experience had prepared me to be part of large-scale social change in South Africa," she explains.

She talks about the film *Waiting for Superman*, which concludes that there is no hero ready to sweep in and save us; we need

to take control of our future ourselves. This idea is shared by enlightened thinkers such as Dr Mamphela Ramphele, who has called on South Africans to become not subjects, but citizens; to take not a waiting posture, but an active ownership posture.

Dr van Rhyne talks with influential educators such as Dr Ramphele, Professor Jonathan Jansen (rector and vice chancellor of the University of the Free State) and Professor Brian O'Connell (rector and vice chancellor of the University of the Western Cape) confirmed her belief that education is the area where we most need business, the government and citizens to Walk Together.

Trevor Manuel's National Planning Commission, a blueprint for developing South Africa, also places education as a national priority.

"I feel we are sitting on a time bomb," says Dr Van Rhyne. "If business leaders don't get involved, they will not have a business in 10 years' time."

"As a business owner, I have to recruit people. Ninety percent are unemployable because of a poor educational foundation. The majority of our 21 000 schools are underperforming, putting 11 million children at risk and creating the possibility of another lost generation.

"We need to grow employment, productivity and the talent pool. We need to start inputting at seed level - our schools. But many do not know how to contribute," she adds.

This belief led Dr van Rhyne to establish the School @ the Centre of Community initiative. She has developed innovative, cutting-edge ideas that create practical platforms for business



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and community leaders to develop their skills and those of their employees by contributing to education in meaningful ways.

She first focused on an idea called Partners for Possibility, in which business leaders work side by side with school principals in a supportive relationship. She believes this offers the opportunity for pioneering corporate social investment; a very powerful leadership development process that requires practical, personal involvement and which is catalytic. "It has a snowball effect because it involves mobilising the whole community to participate in supporting a school," she notes.

"But my experience with Ridwan showed me the value of showing up authentically. Leadership is a reciprocal, give-and-take relationship. My role is to support, appreciate, challenge and ignite."

In the early days of her partnership with Samodien, she recalls the teachers lamenting the seeming lack of interest by parents who constantly failed to attend school meetings. The first challenge was to see whether it would be possible to get teachers and parents talking. They started off by speaking to Grade Four learners about their hopes and dreams. Then they asked these learners to invite a

"Most of our principals are de-energised, disillusioned and overburdened. Principals are expected to manage major turnarounds at their school; however, very few have any idea how to lead a complicated change process. They are incredibly busy just dealing with day-to-day demands," she comments.

"We have learnt from experience in organisational change that it is not sufficient to put people who need to lead change through training programmes. In business, we support change leaders with coaches, consultants and change teams. The least we can do is to provide each principal with a change partner (someone who can support and assist them). Most of the principals we've talked to are keen to be part of this initiative.

"We have a huge resource pool we can tap into among the thousands of business leaders in South Africa who have been trained to lead change," adds Dr Van Rhyn.

The South African Principals' Association has endorsed this project without reservation and Dr Van Rhyn has been invited by the Gauteng Provincial Department of Education's School of Leadership to give a presentation about her initiative.

She firmly believes the process will mobilise entire communities to share the responsibility for improved education of our children. "We want parents, learners, elders, accountants and ordinary citizens to support their schools. It's not about telling them what to do, but inspiring people to give of their unique gifts."

Dr Van Rhyn talks about how Kannemeyer Primary School asked the elders, or *gogo's*, of the community for help. "The children get so excited when the *gogo's* arrive. All they need to give is a hug or listen to a child or just make a cup of tea for a teacher.

"For a long time, I have had a chip on my shoulder that I had no 'Struggle' credentials," she reveals. "As a 46-year-old white person, I have been extremely privileged. I feel a moral obligation to make democracy work.

"I am scared beyond belief about what I am taking on, but I cannot not do this work. Why do we live here if we are not willing to help create a South Africa that works?

"The time has come to give back not only with our money, but our knowledge, time and humanity," Dr Van Ryn concludes. ▲

*Michele Alexander*

**"We have a huge resource pool we can tap into among the thousands of business leaders in South Africa who have been trained to lead change"**

A pilot project was launched in the Cape Flats at Kannemeyer Primary School where Dr Van Rhyn partnered with the school's principal, Ridwan Samodien.

This experience had an enormous impact on her thinking about effective leadership development. "I have had the opportunity to be part of many leadership initiatives, but often the real impact has been minimal. It remains head knowledge.

"However, being Ridwan's partner was without any doubt the most powerful leadership development experience that I have ever participated in. It was for me more powerful than doing an MBA or a doctorate. I learnt so much about what it means to be a leader. It shifted my sense of self and helped define my role as a South African citizen. My sense of alienation finally disappeared.

"Leaders grapple with the concept of being a traditional 'hero' leader: knowing everything, having all the answers and controlling from the top down. This invokes huge anxiety and the need to create a facade," says Dr Van Rhyn.

significant adult in their life to a conversation with their teachers. The hope was that if the invitation came from the learners, more parents or guardians would show up.

This marked a turning point in the school. "To everyone's surprise, more than 60 adults attended that first meeting. Parents acknowledged that they had felt disengaged from the learning process. Teachers discovered that parents wanted to be involved.

"There has been a remarkable change in the 'vibe' of the school. The parents were invited into a partnership with the school and have since formed a Community of Committed Parents," observes Dr van Rhyn.

This initiative has now been rolled out in 45 schools around the country and she has witnessed remarkable results. "The changes have been profound. I have actually seen this approach transform communities."

Dr van Rhyn's 10-year vision for the School @ the Centre of Community is bold. She hopes to help lift South Africa out of the bottom half of the international education rankings.



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