

When parents and teachers work together

This is an edited extract from the book *Partners for Possibility: How Business Leaders and Principals are Igniting Radical Change in South African Schools* by **Mandy Collins**

ON A CLEAR morning in July 2010, roughly 100 people gathered under a blue-and-white striped tent at Kannemeyer Primary School in Grassy Park, Cape Town.

The tent had not gone up without incident.

The day before, the school's principal, Ridwan Samodien, had gathered various school personnel to help him put it up, but the wind had other ideas.

Twice Ridwan was blown over and went sprawling, but finally the men prevailed. The tent was up, flapping wildly in the howling wind. Above them, the skies glowered with the threat of rain.

Earlier in the week, Ridwan and one of the school's parents had walked the length of Grassy Park's commercial strip, Victoria Road, handing out invitations to surprised community and business members.

Now all that remained was to wait, and see who would arrive.

"When I left at nightfall, I felt sorry for the two security men guarding the tent in the cold and dark," Ridwan recalls, "but my thoughts were occupied with the following day. Would anyone pitch up?"

The anticipated event was the result of an unlikely partnership between Ridwan, the principal of one of South Africa's many underperforming schools, and Louise van Rhyn, a mid-level business manager determined to do something about the education situation.

Kannemeyer Primary School (KPS) had just over 500 pupils from Grade R to Grade 7, and employed 20 teachers.

The diverse Grassy Park community surrounding the school was renowned for its high crime and unemploy-



SHARING: Former MEC for Education Barbara Creecy; Louise van Rhyn from Partners for Possibility; Bob Head, chief financial officer for the SA Revenue Service; and Jane Tsharane, the principal of Makgatho Primary share a lighter moment. The writer says school partnerships with parents and businesses contribute to scholars' success.

PICTURE: MATTHEWS BALOYI

ment rates.

Parental engagement at the school was low and disciplinary challenges were enormous.

But Ridwan is a principal with passion. He'd taught for 31 years and been the principal of KPS for 14 of those.

Early on, he recognised that there was a real lack of community and parental involvement in the school.

One member of staff summed it up with this statement: "Parents in ex-model C schools are actively involved at their children's schools. In our schools, parents simply aren't interested."

Ridwan was particularly anxious to bring the parents of KPS more fully on board with the education of their children

and the development of the school. The question was how to go about this. He had done his level best to improve the school's situation through a variety of programmes and initiatives, but none of his efforts had borne the fruits he'd hoped for.

The striped tent and the event he'd planned for that blustery July would herald the beginning of significant positive changes at KPS. Because Ridwan had been the first to say yes to a new idea: a partnership with a business person.

Ridwan would bring his educational skills and the business person would bring their management and administrative skills, and together they would work on leading change at the school.

Initially they met to talk about running a community-building workshop at KPS, as Louise had some experience in that area. They began by examining the belief that parents were not interested.

What if this story everyone was telling themselves was actually contributing to the problem? What if both parents and teachers started to see each other as partners in educating their children instead? Perhaps if the story about parental involvement changed, the behaviour would too.

As a starting point, Ridwan and Louise began with the practical issue of discipline in Grade 4 classes. How could they initiate a conversation between Grade 4 teachers and parents,

given the historically low parent turnout at school strategy sessions and parent meetings?

They decided to meet with the pupils, talking to them about their hopes and dreams for the future, and asking them to invite a significant adult to a conversation with Ridwan and their teachers.

The hope was that by asking

the pupils to invite the adults, more parents and caregivers would be present.

This marked a turning point for KPS.

To the surprise of all the teachers, there were more than 60 adults in the room at the first meeting, all of whom were keen to be part of the conversation. Parents acknowledged that they felt disengaged from the learning process, leaving the responsibility to the teachers, while teachers discovered that the parents cared deeply about what was happening in the classrooms and wanted to be more involved.

And so Ridwan and Louise decided to try and engage the larger community as well as the school's parent body, setting up the blue-and-white tent,

sending out invitations, contacting local businesses and media, calling educational officials and fervently hoping and praying that somebody would show up.

"I had a restless night," Ridwan remembers, "rising early to meet Louise, who was waiting for me when I got there at 6.30."

His fears of bad weather and a poor turnout were soon allayed.

The sun rose on a clear, beautiful morning with not a breath of wind, and about 100 people filed into the tent – teachers, volunteers, people who worked in the school, people from other organisations, and officials from the Department of Education.

"To get people talking, small

conversation groups were arranged, with a teacher, a parent, and a learner in each cluster, sitting knee to knee," says Ridwan.

"At the end, parents said they couldn't believe they'd had a conversation with teachers and with the principal. They probably saw us as aliens or something! But we were able to break down the barriers; we got people talking and sharing their dreams for our children. In this simple way, people become connected as human beings."

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