

Seeds of change

When someone climbs Mount Kilimanjaro to raise money for charity, you know they're serious about helping others. Bryanston's Jane Chapman did this ... and much more!

It's been 14 years since Jane Chapman met Milton, the man who changed the course of her life forever. She was one of the moms taking St Stithians students, including her oldest daughter, Natasha, to do community service. They were working in an informal settlement, Drummond, and it was here that she was introduced to 15-year-old Milton. 'There he was, single-handedly looking after his two younger brothers, making sure they had food to eat, got to school on time, did their homework and had all their needs met. At the same time, Milton had to make sure that he was passing, too. He was dealing with such unimaginably difficult circumstances and yet he was so positive, resilient and determined ... just the most wonderful soul who made a remarkable impression on me,' Jane recalls.

At the same time, Milton introduced Jane to a woman in her mid-thirties. 'To me, Eliza also stood out. She was hard at work sewing the most beautiful little girls' dresses and making the loveliest beaded bracelets while also looking after a big group of children. Even though she didn't have basic resources like water and electricity, she told me she wasn't going to let that stop her from making a proper go of her life. At the end of the day, Tash and I were so moved by the people we had met and I just knew I had to start a sustainable skills project to help.'

At the time, Jane was working in the fashion industry. 'I had my own business organising fashion shows and shoots that also allowed me to raise funds for self-help African initiatives, which has always been important to me.' While in the fashion business, Jane started a skills project focused on entrepreneurial and socio-economical development, which later grew into a registered NGO, Seeds of Africa.

Besides her business, Jane was also determined to not miss a thing while her children were growing up. Her husband Colin and their children Natasha, Jessica and Sean mean the world to her and are her priority. 'We're a tightly-knit family and

use any excuse to get together for family holidays and long, lazy lunches at home.'

Since founding Seeds, Jane has spent a great deal of time with Milton and a number of other community members. Although she holds every one of them close to her heart Milton's is still one of her most special seeds. 'When I met him, he could fit all his possessions into a

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Checkers packet. Now he's our skills centre manager, has a team of people working under him selling SIM cards and airtime and is married with two children. He's doing tremendously well for himself!' she beams.

Another good news story that Jane loves telling is that of the sewing women. 'These women are our true South African heroes. When they first came to Seeds for training, they had so little hope for their future and battled to even look you in the eye. Now they have their own businesses and take orders to make school uniforms for the local children.'

Jane's face lights up again when she starts talking about the crèches. 'When I started Seeds, we were devastated to see how children between a few months and seven years old were being dropped off at crèche at five in the morning and

only fetched after eight at night. They'd be in a shack all day with no windows, a hard, concrete floor, no toilets and no educational material! Jane and her partner, Jenni Sennett, started raising funds to improve the conditions at these crèches, as well as putting together training programmes for the teachers. And you can bet that their efforts have been anything but small!

Last year, Jane and Jess climbed Mount Kilimanjaro to raise money for the kids. 'Nothing can prepare you for summiting Kilimanjaro, especially in a -15 degree windstorm! It's a very long climb and the altitude affects your breathing, but with the inspiring women and children in mind throughout the trek, Jess and I were able to make it to the top. In the end, it was worth every moment of exhaustion!' So what's next? 'Even though Seeds is a small organisation, we're growing our reach every day thanks to the exceptional Seeds of Africa team and our pro-active donors who support our vision. In essence, this is to improve lives and see the underprivileged become financially viable, grow into role models for their children and see the ripple effect. This is why I'm dedicated to giving people the skills, tools and environment to empower themselves and provide them with choices. I believe that if you have choice in life, you're truly, blessed.'

Get involved!

If you'd like to get involved in either of these programmes, Jane and her team would love to hear from you! Donations of all sorts are also always welcome. You can drop off essential items like clothes, blankets, toiletries and educational toys at the Seeds of Africa offices, which are at Ngwenya Glass Village, Shady Lane, Muldersdrift. Details: 011-796-3005 or visit www.seedsof africa.com

