

Pam Jackson & Renée Rossouw

ONS PLEK

a place for us

*The story of the Ons Plek Project
Girls' Shelter in Cape Town*



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As children we always had chickens in our yard. When a hawk or eagle flew overhead we had to run and put a basket or bowl over the baby chickens to protect them. That is how I see Ons Plek, like a basket protecting the children from the dangers of life.

- **Nontobeko Moni**
homework support teacher at Ons Plek

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The girls at Ons Plek Project who drew all the illustrations used in this book.

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Renée Rossouw has a varied academic and work background, including music, librarianship and pastoral theology. She has been involved with Ons Plek Projects since 1989 in many different capacities, and has been the Deputy Director for the last decade.

Preface

This book has been written to help us all to better understand the lives of children most in need of our help and support. A good understanding of the children's lives is essential in developing effective and appropriate programmes for them. Although the book draws from the experiences of a project working with girls the knowledge gained is applicable to children of both sexes. The experiences of the project are common to many such projects.

Poverty, family violence, untimely death, abuse of every kind, rape of every kind, illness, loss and betrayal stalk the lives of countless young women in South Africa. Some of these girls say "enough!" and seek a different life. They deserve our help. In order to tell the truths needing to be told, the narratives in this book deal with serious, intimate and traumatic events in the lives of young people. All the incidents, events and responses in this book are true. They are also totally confidential. For this reason *all identifying details* relating to the girls and their histories have been changed. Despite this, many people who have assisted in reading preliminary versions of the book have said, "I recognise this story, I know who this child is." In each case they have incorrectly identified the child. The reason is that these particular narratives have been selected because they are representative of the types of experiences which propel children onto our streets. It is sad that the same stories, with different names, places and dates, could be true of so many young South African women.

This book is not primarily a book of theory about child welfare or street children.¹ There are enough of these. It is a book based on the stories of girls who have come to us for help; the theory underlying our working methods is presented in the stories themselves. We do include references to the theory to explain our actions, in plain English that is easy to relate to the daily situations which childcare workers face. References and suggestions for further reading are also included.

Street children's residences are known as shelters, because they often start as very basic facilities. In fact, Ons Plek and other similar projects have to have more programmes than children's homes, because of the level of trauma experienced by street children who come to us for help. We do not like the term 'shelter' because it conveys an impression of shelter offered for only one night, a very basic bread-and-soup-and-mattress service. Like the name 'street child', which we also do not like, we use 'shelter' because that is the term people know.

The text of the book has been written by Pam Jackson and Renée Rossouw, but it contains the experiences and knowledge that have been built up by all the people who work at Ons Plek. Not everyone's name can be included in the book as we tell the stories of this work, so we include a list of all staff members after the last chapter.

¹ In Chapter 11 we respond to the question "Can you call a child a street child?" and consider some of the issues raised by this sometimes problematic terminology.

Chapter 1

**The stolen child, the murderer and
Ons Plek's elite detective team**

Pam Jackson

"Once upon a time a wicked woman stole a baby girl from her family. The baby grew up to be a beautiful girl who was forced to do all the housework for the wicked woman. The woman's son beat the girl whenever he felt like it. One day she ran away..."

This is the true story of what happened to Thuli. The chapter gives an overview of the programmes in place at Ons Plek: why they exist, how they work, the obstacles they face, and the happy endings they sometimes bring about. These programmes will be explored in more detail in the chapters that follow.

Early intervention intake programme – accessible 24 hours a day

Girls are referred to Ons Plek Residential Intake Programme within hours or a few days of arriving in the Cape Town CBD. Usually they are running away from abuse or neglect at home. The girls' circumstances are assessed immediately on arrival. Each girl is then referred to our family preservation or family reunification programme. Statutory services are provided by our social work staff.

Family reunification and preservation programmes

In both programmes, family interviews are held as soon as possible to resolve the breakdown in the family. Early intervention in family conflict arising from different values between parents and children, as well as facilitation of discussion about negative family dynamics, frequently results in the family being preserved. If the family is abusive or functioning so badly that the child will be neglected, the child is placed in care while family problems are worked out.

Family reunification programme

Ons Plek believes that children growing up in children's homes is a second-best option. Wherever possible, children should grow up in their families of origin, or failing that, in another family; only if this is not possible should a children's home be considered. Our efforts are directed in this order so that children grow up in the most empowering and least restrictive situations.

Thuli at Ons Plek

– and the search for her family

Thuli was picked up by the police at Mowbray station, where a commuter had noticed that she had been sitting in one spot all day long. The police brought her to Ons Plek on a hot day in December 1997.

At Ons Plek Thuli maintained that she was from Kimberley; that her parents had died and her aunt had then sent her to her granny in Khayelitsha. The granny had moved and Thuli could not find her. Our childcare staff at the time, Jenny Dukani and Joyce Mateta, and social worker Yumna van der Schyff, alternated between gentle probing and patient waiting for the real story to emerge from this very quiet 10-year-old girl. Progress was reviewed by the social work supervisor, Pam Jackson, and by staff comparing notes during the weekly case discussion.

After a few days Thuli agreed to take Joyce Mateta to her house in Delft. As the childcare worker approached the house on foot, she encountered several neighbours who were curious to see Thuli on her way back home. They informed Joyce that the child had a heavy load of housework to do on a daily basis and that she was often beaten. Not for the first time, our lack of a car for home visits yielded the advantages of gaining useful community contacts and information. In the house, the childcare worker was met by a large woman who explained that Thuli had been abandoned by her mother at the age of ten months and that her father had died. The woman, who introduced herself as Mrs Mzamo, said that she had kindly fostered the child ever since. She was willing to take her back, although she said that Thuli was a naughty child. On the subject of the identities of the child's parents she was evasive.

The reports from the neighbours, coupled with many old scars on her body, corroborated Thuli's explanations of the reasons why she had run away. The usual plan in such a situation would be to engage the parents and child in a process which would enhance their awareness of how they each contribute to the problem. This enables them to change their behaviour if they choose to do so. Discussions and techniques on how to listen to each other and communicate their needs, as well as methods of discipline, are covered. In this case, however, the 'foster' mother was rigid in her denial of any abusive behaviour, and adamant that the child was a naughty child. Given this attitude on her part, little progress in re-unifying the 'foster' family could be made, and the child could not be discharged from our care into a place which the neighbours had said was an abusive home.

While her home circumstances were being followed up on, and a long-term plan for her future drawn up, attention was given to Thuli's schooling. She nervously joined our informal school programme in the New Year, where she was initially very quiet.

On 12 May 1998 a file entry made in Thuli's file by the education team, Renée Rossouw and homework assistant Nontobeko Moni, stated that "she is in a very concrete stage of development in arithmetic – she cannot count beyond her ten fingers. In practical matters like cleaning the house and shopping she can cope although she does not understand the money aspect." They noted that an occupational therapy and a psychometric assessment were needed for her education needs to be determined. Also noted was the fact that when a literacy class conducted in Langa in her own language, isiXhosa, was tried, she got lost on the way to the class and went missing for a week.

The social worker and childcare workers reported that Thuli still wet her bed and was "easily frightened".

Regrettably, organising assessments of the kind that Thuli needed takes months, because the resources are not sufficient to meet the demand; but in January 1999 Renée was ready to apply to Molenbeeck Training Centre where Thuli could receive extra help. Renée wrote in the application: "Her lack of ability to retain what she has learnt, therefore, may be linked to the trauma she had experienced in her past". By February 1999 Thuli was finally in our formal school programme, which in her case meant Molenbeeck Training Centre.

The task of checking on Thuli's homework and encouraging her to keep trying at school fell to long-term staff member Nontobeko Moni, who was responsible for our homework and morning school programme. Like all children, Thuli did her fair share of trying to avoid homework.

Soon after becoming a Molenbeeck learner, Thuli moved from the first stage shelter, Ons Plek (Our Place), to Siviwe (God has heard us), our second stage home for more settled children. The childcare workers there, Faniswa Muba and Joyce Sethole, reported that she was not washing herself or her clothes and this, combined with the bedwetting, was causing other children to complain.

At a weekly Siviwe staff meeting with supervisor Renée, they decided to make a special effort to help her tidy her cupboard and check daily on her hygiene. The individual attention paid off and within a month the file entries reflected a marked improvement, and even less frequent bedwetting. This lack of cleanliness is something we have often seen in children who have little self-esteem. Over time, counselling and our lifeskills programme help with this. As with other girls, Thuli dreamed of having her own home and becoming a mother one day. With the older girls she learned home care, baby care and parenting skills, in order to avoid the cycle of her children also running away to the streets. This training in home and child care is an important preventative service.

Informal daily education programme

On arrival, the girls are usually very preoccupied with the issues which brought them to the streets, and in addition they tend to struggle to concentrate because of their restless and often substance-dependent lifestyle on the streets. When a child first comes to the shelter, she may well drift away simply following her latest desire. Our "Morning School" provides a developmental programme to prepare the children who are not yet ready or able to attend school or work, and to assess the most appropriate educational placement for each girl.

Formal education programme

When ready, girls graduate from our informal school to attend one of many formal schools in Cape Town. Our many-faceted approaches include social-educational assessment and counselling, scholastic and developmental assessment, a range of support structures such as homework and school visiting programmes, and supplementary education. Supplementary education sessions take the form of informal sessions, including English reading and communication sessions; computer-based learning activities and art. Holiday programmes also provide supplementary education and include swimming, science, geography, art and 'roots and culture' activities. Our aim remains to help girls to really master their school work, rather than just be promoted through the system.

Homework and school programme

Children who have lived on the streets or without a stable home base almost invariably struggle at school. Teachers often struggle to integrate children with different needs into their sometimes very large classes. Our school support teacher helps the children understand their school work and the social skills they need at school better, but also gives the teachers valuable insights into effective ways of working with the girls.

Lifeskills programme

The daily programme is structured to teach healthy relationship skills and to reinforce these in practice. In addition to learning a range of social skills as part of the daily household routine, girls attend vocational preparation sessions which teach them how to use the telephone and telephone directories, prepare CVs, approach prospective employers and work in teams with others.

Exploring deeper problems through counselling

Every good fairy story has a golden thread in it. Counselling is the golden thread interwoven into every programme at Ons Plek.

Having settled down at Siviwe, and progressing well at school, Thuli found the energy to focus on deeper problems. She wanted to belong to somebody. In the June holidays she was the only Siviwe child who had no one to go to at all. Thuli began to hanker after her 'foster' parent, Mrs Mzamo. She forgot all about the previous abuse she had experienced, and built up an idealised picture of the 'foster' mother whom she fantasised was her real mother.

Faniswa and Renée reminded Thuli of the abuse, but nonetheless offered to accompany her on a home visit in July 1999 to see if any more details about her family would be forthcoming. This was also important, as it would keep Thuli in touch with the reality of the situation she had left, as well as give Ons Plek another chance to search for more information about Thuli's parents.

Initially the family were happy to see Thuli and invited her for home visits over weekends. A month later, however, Mrs Mzamo had decided not to fetch Thuli any more. By then her son had been stabbed and four days later her daughter had been shot at. Mrs Mzamo claimed that the neighbours thought that she and her children practised witchcraft and accused her of stealing other people's children.

This hostile relationship with the neighbours indicated to us that all was not well in the home, although we were not sure quite what the dynamics were.

By now, Mrs Mzamo had disclosed that Thuli's father had died, and that she did not know his name or address but that he had worked for a baker in an area known as the Factory Corner.

By January 2000 Mrs Mzamo had incurred more wrath from the community because she had taken twin baby boys into her house who the community believed had been stolen. "Now the neighbours want to kill her," reads our file entry for 11 January 2000.

Thuli was torn between being sure that this was her mother, and not liking the woman for shouting at her. She cried angrily when we tried to discuss with her our fears about her going to her foster mother. By February 2000 we had stopped Thuli's home visits, but were allowing visits by the family at Siviwe where we could keep an eye on Thuli's safety.

Mrs Mzamo finally told us the father's first name, which she said

she had got from a chance meeting with someone who knew him; but, she claimed, all other sources of information had moved away from the area or died.

In May 2001 the Ons Plek team decided to find Thuli a hosting volunteer to whom she could go for weekends. The 'family' contacts were not heading anywhere. We had sent her on weekend courses and encouraged friends in the community to build up her social circle. The volunteer then committed herself to taking Thuli home for weekends on a regular basis.

Thuli lacked a sense of belonging and a sense of her past. To help her explore her feelings in a concrete way, her counselling sessions were extended to include life story sessions with our life story counsellor, Allerease Olanrewaju, who reported that "there is an emptiness in working with Thuli. When I speak to her about the family not keeping her, I end up feeling awful as if I have done something wrong. I think the empty feeling I have with her is a reflection of the empty feeling she has."

Allerease never experienced this empty feeling at any time other than in her sessions with Thuli. When this happens, it is a clear indication to a therapist that the feeling is very likely the emotion of the client. The emotion is so uncomfortable for the client that she projects it away from herself and onto the therapist. By first identifying the emotion and then holding it in her own feelings so that she could look at it clearly, Allerease was able to reflect very gently to Thuli the pain that Thuli was in. On this basis Thuli could move forward on a conscious level with the process of mourning her lack of a family.

Gradually Thuli was able to acknowledge that the Mzamos were not her family, although she still clung to them because she had no one else. Her bedwetting continued to wax or wane according to her emotional state. Childcare workers Joyce and Faniswa again discussed her progress. They decided to try new strategies involving waking her up, not drinking at night and placing black plastic bags on the bed.

On 19 June 2001 Thuli's file showed that three-and-a-half years after her admission to Ons Plek, there was still no progress in tracing her real family. We would not allow the child to have too much contact with the 'foster' family because she had been physically abused and exploited by them. The fear which the family's neighbours had of them, together with the periodic scapegoating of the family by the neighbours, was a worrying sign of a deeper problem which we could not put our finger on yet. We had followed Ons Plek's usual practice of looking for facts about the situation, and also listening to and discussing our gut feelings to assist us in finding the facts. In this case a few years of such listening had not yielded much, except that we were sure the child would be in danger with the foster family and we were sure that there was more to the story than we had heard from those involved.

Longer-term care

There is a small core of girls (about thirteen per cent) who are with us for more than two years. These girls are highly unlikely to return home before they are self-supporting, because of their home circumstances. They are also hard to place in foster care because of age or behaviour factors. Most of them choose to have regular family/community contact, with support from the Ons Plek staff with regard to difficulties they experience when visiting home. If it is too dangerous for the child to visit her family on her own, she is accompanied by a staff member or else the family must visit her at Ons Plek. Older children do visit on their own, even if circumstances are not ideal, if they ask to do so, so that they retain a realistic picture of their homes. This helps them to participate on a realistic basis in decisions that need to be made about their lives. They also love their families despite their shortcomings, and need this contact with them.

Counselling programme

Emotional healing is crucial to the successful interaction of girls with family, employers and teachers. Their state of mind affects their ability to study and to concentrate on everyday tasks. While it is difficult to quantify emotional changes, we can identify significant changes in the emotional wellbeing of each girl as we look at her growth over a period of time. Our counselling programme remains an ongoing process. Emotional changes tend to be slow, but looking back we see girls who found their depression, anxiety or aggression totally overwhelming when they first came, and who later become more able to cope with conflict, increased responsibilities and loss, without losing hope and direction as they work out their new dreams and plans. What often happens with children in care is that it is too painful for them to process the reality that their parents do not care for them, so they idealise them in their absence. One of the hardest aspects of counselling for the care-givers and the children is processing this reality, and coming to terms with it in an accepting way.

Life stories in counselling

Life stories are used as part of counselling. Children who cannot express themselves easily in discussions about their lives, do so in "play therapy" or in a life story book. This entails making a book that records the important things in their lives. The exercise gives them some sense of identity and roots, and most importantly, an opportunity to talk about their emotions, while engaged in a very practical task. On the visits they relate stories which they have forgotten about, stories about people they know and things that have happened to them. This gives us a fuller picture of their lives, and sometimes provides some new clues to follow in our hunt for families.

Reunification programme detective work

In the interests of family reunification the Ons Plek staff frequently become detectives. Sometimes the staff literally prowl the empty streets at night searching for missing family members. We sometimes attend funerals where it is believed that certain contacts could be made. In one case, Renée traced friends of friends of friends who lived in remote areas in Africa and who knew family histories of the child in our care.

Mrs Mzamo's 33-year-old daughter came to fetch Thuli for a visit. The weekly file entry records that she told the same story as before: "that Thuli was abandoned by Thuli's mother, that the father had died and that the only person who knew him went to the Eastern Cape and was never seen again." Something was missing from this story. It was impossible that they knew the father as well as they claimed to and knew the biological mother, but did not know the child's clan name and home village. Could the child have been stolen? Was this the basis for the neighbours' accusation that Mrs Mzamo stole children?

Shortly after this visit a "home visit" was planned, but on arriving we found that the Mzamo family had moved. Such was Thuli's desire to belong that she drew a happy picture of herself as part of the Mzamo family for her life story book, despite the fact that they had moved without telling her.

Contact with the family ceased, but fortunately Thuli was invited to a school friend's home for the December holidays and continued to see her volunteer regularly.

In January 2002 Renée, Joyce and Faniswa intensified their search for information about Thuli's biological family. Faniswa visited the street committee of the Mzamos former neighbourhood. They told her where Mrs Mzamo had moved to. Faniswa visited her there, and extracted the information that the father had been killed by people and put in plastic packets. She was told again that he had worked in an area called Factory Corner. Mrs Mzamo gave his clan name as Tshawe. She said she had forgotten the address where she had lived at the time of the murder, but meeting the son in the street as she left, Faniswa got the address from him before his mother could warn him not to give it to her.

Nontobeko, the homework support teacher, knew that a funeral was being held to which many Factory Corner workers were going. She was dispatched there to follow up the Factory Corner connections. Renée got ready to search the rubbish dumps for Thuli's mother, who Mrs Mzamo had said was "a coloured woman last seen living on the Bellville tip". Faniswa and Joyce tried to trace the Grade 1 teacher at Thuli's first school, but this contact yielded little information. Even the secretaries at Ons Plek, Sharon Bey-Leveld and Odette Engelbrecht, who don't normally get involved with the girls' cases, got on the phone to make contact with radio stations and the press, asking them to help us with our search.

The skeleton in the cupboard

Faniswa finally struck gold when she traced Mrs Mzamo's address at the time of the murder, after extensive enquiries made necessary because the house numbers given her by Mrs Mzamo's son had been swopped around. Faniswa learned from these neighbours that Thuli's father had been Mrs Mzamo's boyfriend, and that she had beaten him to death when Thuli, his child from

a previous relationship, was four years old.

Thuli was shocked when she learned this, and walked around in a daze for a few days; but she processed the information and assured Renée that she wanted to continue to find out as much as possible about her past, even if the news was bad.

Faniswa also found out where the family originated from. The family is a large one whose extended family connections are spread across five villages in the area. Some family members now live in Cape Town. Faniswa began following up leads to find relatives of the father, who was now known to be Siphon Mchunu, with the clan name Tshawe. She contacted the policeman who had arrested Mrs Mzamo after the murder, and who believed Mrs Mzamo to be guilty of murder despite the dismissal of the charges by the court for lack of evidence. He willingly accompanied her to see Mrs Mzamo. He extracted information from her son, who suddenly remembered details about the likely whereabouts of the Mchunus. Faniswa then went through the telephone book looking for the numbers of the Mchunu family and started telephoning. One contact led to another, and soon Faniswa and Thuli had met with several people with the name Mchunu who provided further contacts. Finally Mr Siphon Mchunu's brother met them, somewhat reluctantly, and confirmed that he was the brother of the dead man; but he said that he doubted his brother had fathered this child. He agreed to consult his family and then telephone Faniswa.

Thuli was on tenterhooks. Two weeks later, when she was giving up hope, she and Faniswa were called to the house of Siphon Mchunu's older sister. On the telephone the sister had said the family were not aware that their brother had had a child with anyone except his wife, but when she saw Thuli she cried out that the child looked like her brother Siphon Mchunu. Other family members arrived and became very excited when they saw the family likeness.

The family immediately began making plans to take Thuli to the grandmother in the Eastern Cape. They also said that they had not been happy about Siphon's involvement with Mrs Mzamo, because she had killed her previous husband.

When Faniswa and Thuli met Siphon's wife she denied any knowledge of Thuli, or knowledge of any other woman who could have been her mother. She and her children, fathered by Siphon, claimed that Thuli did not look like any family member. However, both Faniswa and some neighbours thought that Thuli looked like the children, who would be her half-brothers and -sisters. They thought the wife was worried that she would have to take responsibility for Thuli if she acknowledged the family resemblance.

Administrative programme

Working quietly in the background throughout this counselling and care process are Sharon Bey-Leveld and Odette Engelbrecht, who for many are Ons Plek's public face. Their posts as secretaries are indispensable. They keep the wheels turning for everyone else who can then focus on the girls: social workers doing counselling; teachers teaching; childcare workers mothering, feeding, clothing; director fundraising, supervising and coordinating. It is their personal touch which keeps our local support base growing, and without that we cannot survive.

Reunification difficulties

Once families are traced, the real work begins. In most families there is a history of abuse or serious neglect, substance addiction, unmotivated and discouraged parents. A long process of empowerment through counselling is needed.

In a well-functioning family such as the one we traced for Thuli, the question becomes: is the family willing to make the commitment to caring for this child? If so, will they and the child be able to adapt to each other? Our counselling work does not stop until we have a sense that a happy ending will be possible, for the child and the family.

A happy ending?

Faniswa kept on doggedly following up the contacts she had unearthed. Finally the family in the Eastern Cape saw photographs of Thuli and agreed, despite their initial scepticism and requests for blood tests, that she was definitely a family member.

Thuli visited her family in the Eastern Cape, who held a big party to welcome her and slaughtered an animal in her honour. The Ons Plek staff prepared her for the realities of what it could be like at home once the 'honeymoon' period was over. She has now been living happily with the family, one of whom has formally adopted her, for four years. The family report, in their regular telephone conversations with Ons Plek staff, that she is progressing, with the expected amount of discipline needed by teenagers from time to time.

At the moment the wicked woman is still living somewhere in Cape Town ...

