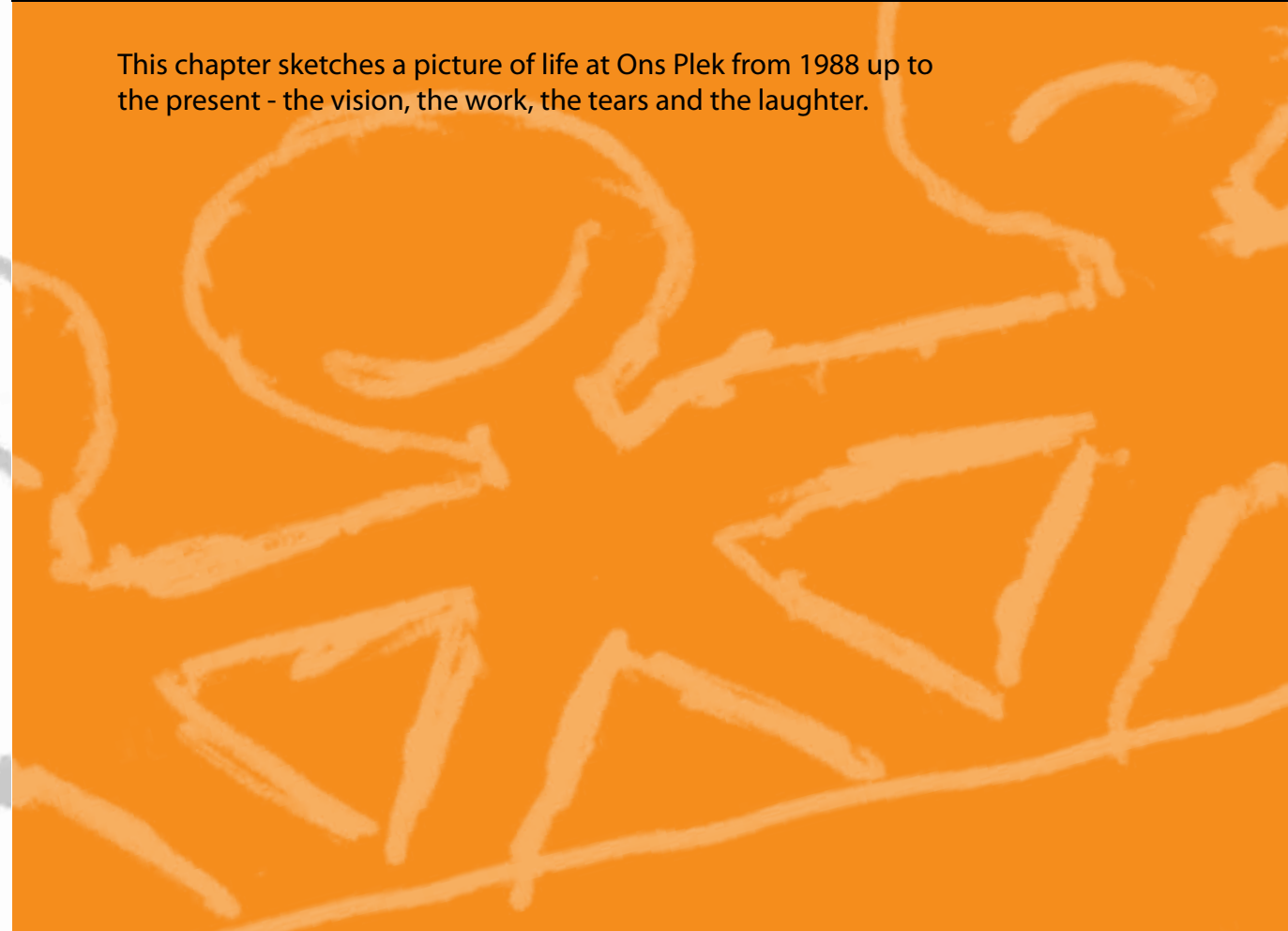


Chapter 2

A place for us

Pam Jackson

This chapter sketches a picture of life at Ons Plek from 1988 up to the present - the vision, the work, the tears and the laughter.

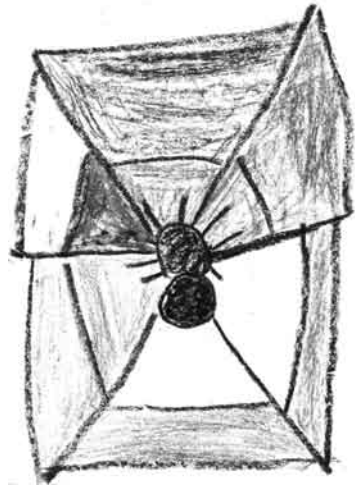


In 1988 two thin, dirty 15-year-old girls came timidly into the newly opened Ons Plek Shelter for help. Both girls lived on the streets with an older woman, who protected and 'cared' for them while they worked for her as beggars.

On arrival, the children, whose names were Chantal and Samantha, were welcomed by the childcare worker, given a shower and clean second-hand clothes, and the tortuous process of cleaning their hair of lice was embarked on. The more delicate process of finding out what problems in their families had driven them onto the street was on the periphery of the staff's attentions, waiting for the girls to relax sufficiently to trust staff with their stories.

Two days after their arrival, childcare worker Roslyn Martin stepped outside into the small courtyard for a breath of fresh air. Cowering in the far corner were Chantal and Samantha, and hovering over them menacingly was the old woman, trying to beat them out of the courtyard and onto the streets again. Roslyn, talking softly but firmly, persuaded the woman to leave the children. Her actions generated some feelings in the girls of trust in the staff of Ons Plek - a necessary first step in making them willing to tell their story.

What they told us was that Samantha had been asked by her alcoholic mother to leave home when her father had died, three years previously. As the oldest child, she was the one most likely to survive on her own. Chantal had lived on and off the streets with her mother most of her life, until her mother disappeared. She had then teamed up with Samantha.



Girls on the streets

Over the period they had spent together on the streets, they had lived in various loosely formed groups of children. Sometimes they 'strolled' with other girls. At times their group of girls had joined with a group of boys who protected the girls. The boys 'aanklopped'¹ for money in return for the girls working and washing for them. Many of the older girls had a 'steady' boyfriend among the boys, to whom they were remarkably faithful and which prevented other boys from sleeping with them.

They slept in hidden places, such as under bridges, on rooftops and in parking garages, to avoid being raped at night and to avoid the police. Sometimes they kept to the same sleeping place for weeks; at other times they moved almost every night.

Chantal, who had strolled most of her life, was an expert at choosing which doorways would be the warmest on any particular night.

On subsequent shopping expeditions for Ons Plek she would notice which wind was blowing and point to the most protected doorways en route.

The girls in their group tended to be teenagers, whereas the boys ranged in age from five years upwards. As girls who had been brought up in poor families, it had been their job to do the housework and babysit. Once on the street they continued to keep themselves clean, and thus were largely invisible to the public eye. They also did not beg at robots, because this territory was strictly controlled by the biggest boys, who sent the smallest boys to beg. The children almost always came from poverty-stricken families. Whereas some were abused physically by drunk parents who had turned to alcohol to

¹ Literally, 'to knock' - in this context it means to beg.

help them cope with the grinding stresses of poverty, others had parents who simply did not have the energy to care for them effectively, or to protect them from danger. A small proportion of the children had caring parents who, because they had to go out to work, simply could not be at home to prevent their children from getting into a 'bad' crowd.

Chantal and Samantha spent their days telling people they needed train fare to get home, or cooking and washing clothes with other homeless people near construction sites where they 'aanklopped' for wood and water. If they had enough money, they bought fish and chips. If the opportunity to shoplift arose, they 'shopped' without money. Samantha found that she ate better on the street than she ever had at home.

When they had more than enough money for food they went to the beach, the Roxy cinema or video games centres, or drank alcohol and relaxed with friends on a grassy pavement.

Sometimes they hid their clothes in manholes or gaps in walls, and at other times they wore everything to keep their clothes safe.

About half the girls Chantal and Samantha had met had been raped, and about one fifth of both boys and girls had sometimes engaged in sexual acts to survive. Due to the timid natures and victim mentality of Chantal and Samantha, they had been used to do the risky work for gang members, such as climbing through windows to steal for the gang. At Ons Plek we were to learn that street children did not generally 'work' at crime. Committing a crime or engaging in sex in order to obtain resources was not something planned, but a spontaneous and opportunistic action. If they participated in an organised crime it was because a gang had co-opted them for the occasion.

It was a violent world, scary and unpredictable, but it was also exciting; the adrenalin highs it produced became addictive. In other ways life was easy; there were no deadlines, no timetables, no difficult homework to make you feel stupid, no demands from parents and teachers, no scolding.

The girls sometimes got gifts from those boys staying in The Homestead shelter for boys, stolen or borrowed especially for them. There was no shelter for girls - rather like the proverbial inn at Bethlehem, there was no room for them to be taken in.²

Fixed addresses for Cape Town's street children

Jane Keen, a 'mover and shaker' in the field of street children, explains how, despite being a woman, she did not follow the policy of 'ladies first', but started a boys' shelter as a first step towards addressing the needs of street children in Cape Town, and how Ons Plek eventually was opened:

My involvement with street children began way back in 1980 when I was working as a social worker at Child Welfare Society. At that time there were no shelters for children in Cape Town, or indeed anywhere else in South Africa, which was a matter of great concern to me and others.

After battling with and often defying the authorities, we eventually opened The Homestead shelter for boys in 1982, as a joint project between St Paul's

dear god, thank you
to keep me safe.
thank you for clothes,
food and keeping
me in school. from
asanda

² For more on Chantal and Samantha's stories see the chapter's end.

and St Barnabas churches and Child Welfare. To my great delight I was allowed to move from my work on the farms in Philippi to full-time work with street children. This involved dual responsibility for the boys in the shelter as well as for developing new projects and initiatives for street children in the city.³

Jane subsequently opened James House, Margaret's House and Claremont Shelter together with the local communities. Together the projects met fortnightly for many years under the auspices of Cape Town Child Welfare Society (a large NGO specialising in child protection and care) to learn from each other. The Western Cape Street Children's Forum was formed, with this group as its core.

Non-profit organisations (NPOs) operate with a committee consisting of elected community members. Jane had started The Homestead with concerned members of St Paul's and St Barnabas churches and other interested community members. This little group had met on Friday nights over supper, keen and motivated to help, but having to find their way on uncharted seas. Eventually the group consolidated into a sub-committee of Cape Town Child Welfare Society. Helen Starke, the Director of Child Welfare, wisely foresaw that these new committees would need the experience of Child Welfare in running the fledgling projects, and thus made them sub-committees of the Child Welfare Society Board.

Child Welfare also insisted that unit managers of the projects be social workers, so that the children would receive help on a professional basis, despite the lack of resources. Although the projects were creatively developing an approach and a method of their own, Helen Starke and Jane ensured that the creativity was held firmly in a structure which protected the projects from the 'fly-by-night' ethos that destroys so many similar projects.

Jane continues with the story of how a shelter for girls was opened:



Over the next couple of years I got to know every church building in the centre of the city, looking for places we could use to set up shelters. At first there seemed to be very few girls on the streets (at least in comparison to the number of boys), so the priority seemed to be shelters for boys. But there was always the nagging question (asked by me and many others) What about the girls? Eventually I got in touch with the Central Methodist Mission in Albertus Street and talked to them about the need to provide for the girls. Wonderfully they were open to the idea and offered the top storey of the building presently occupied by Ons Plek - the idea was for the church offices to continue to work in the offices on the ground floor of the building.

It was immediately obvious to me (and anyone else who had worked with street children) that it would be extremely difficult for the shelter to share the building with the church offices. Apart from the very limited space available on the top floor, we would have had to share the bathroom and kitchen downstairs, and the poor staff would have had the girls in and out of their offices all the time and thundering around on the wooden floors upstairs. But we were so desperate that we agreed, knowing that the arrangement couldn't possibly last long, but that once we were in, it

³ Jane Keen. 2002. *More memories of the early days of Ons Plek*. Ons Plek Projects Annual Report

would be more difficult to throw us out! As expected, the staff graciously put up with the chaos for a few months and were then more than motivated to find alternative offices in the rest of the church complex. It is a great tribute to the church leadership that they took on the challenge and did not just tell Ons Plek to close its doors and move elsewhere.⁴

Libby Abrahams, the church secretary, became a close confidante of the girls while her office was in the house. She remained their loyal supporter and friend, and was regularly visited by the girls in her new office.

Our Place

And so, in August 1988, Jane Keen opened Ons Plek, a place of hope for female street children, in the Manse of the old District Six Methodist Church (which had amalgamated with the Central Methodist Church).

"Ons Plek!" ("A place for us!") said the girls when Matilda Smith, a research student at UCT's Institute of Criminology, broke the news to the various groups of girls she had met on the street. By then some of them, like Chantal and Samantha, had been on the streets for three years. With their trust in Matilda to encourage them, they began to trickle in to the place they called "Ons Plek".

Ons Plek was the first shelter for girls in South Africa. It had sixteen beds (eight double bunks) in three bedrooms, as well as two small offices into which seven staff are now crammed, a childcare worker's room which also serves as an interviewing room, meeting room, television room, storage room and reception area, a tiny kitchen, bathrooms and a school / activities room. When it opened, Howard Grassouw, a social worker at The Homestead, was prevailed upon to squeeze the girls into his already impossible schedule. Roslyn Martin and Nontobeko Moni were appointed as full-time and relief childcare workers respectively, and Jane Keen supervised the programme.

And so began a somewhat unique children's home. Unique because any project that works with children whose lives are lived on the fringes of society has to be constantly innovative, while remaining grounded in solid social work principles.

Intake policy at Ons Plek

The hospitality at Ons Plek was better than at the proverbial inn with no room. Not only did Ons Plek have space, but it re-united its residents with their families, and provided education and therapeutic counselling in the interim. It also did not turn any girls away, even when it was full. Although opened at the height of the apartheid years, it admitted girls of all racial and religious groupings, defiantly and at some risk.

The first girls were primarily coloured, with very few blacks and fewer whites. The attitude of the committee and staff from the outset was that they should do what was thought to be right, and not obey inhuman, unjust laws. Although partnered closely with the Central Methodist Mission Church, Ons Plek, as a project of Child Welfare Society, was not faith-based. Girls were free to participate in various church or mosque activities, and this has remained the case. Staff have tended to be devout Christians or Muslims, but Ons Plek is a secular organisation. Muslim children, because of the cohesive nature of their community, are in the minority, but donations of prayer rugs are sought for those who stay at Ons Plek.

⁴ Jane Keen *ibid*.

The assumption with an 'Inn' philosophy is that one will be inclusive. The only group we did turn away was boys. Because of the fact that many girls had had bad experiences with men, and the bullying which takes place when the boys and girls are together, the girls were adamant that Ons Plek must be for girls only. But, contrary to our admission policy, we do admit little brothers so that they can be with their sisters until a place can be found for them to be together. As in all matters, our values dictate the service we try to offer.

The first residents were every bit as raucous as any inn dwellers have ever been, especially as some of them had been on the street for several years by that time.

Jane Keen wrote:

In the course of one fight between two of the residents they managed to break right through at least three locked doors while they chased each other around with broken light bulbs, quickly defusing the myth that girls don't get angry or violent. In another incident (or was it the same one?) one of the house mothers was stabbed in the neck by one of the girls while she was trying to protect one of the other girls. Fortunately she survived but we all had to brush up on our self-protection and conflict management skills!⁵

The criticism from all quarters of officialdom, including some branches of social services and the public, was enormous. Ons Plek was repeatedly told that these were prostitutes who could work as domestic workers. This prejudice, based erroneously on the assumption that all girls on the street must be prostitutes, blinded critics to the fact that these were children. Jane explains further:

When the Department of Welfare came to inspect the shelter [as part of the registration procedure] we took the doors (with the large holes in the middle [made during the fight described above]) off their hinges and hid them so that they wouldn't see what had been going on. At that stage the authorities were still very wary of shelters for street children as they did not fit into their bureaucratic mould, and there was always the threat that they might be closed down if the problems became known. Even other social workers were not always understanding of how damaged most of the girls were by the time they got to Ons Plek, and what kind of behaviour to anticipate. Fortunately the staff and volunteers were able to see beyond this destructiveness and aggression and to reach out to the needy children inside, with amazing results.

Dear God, thank you to give me a home like Ons Plek and to keep me in school. Thank you.

Zikhona

Having lived on the outer edges of society where the boundaries are few, doing what they wanted when they wanted, the girls did not have a high regard for rules. Jane involved the girls and staff in 'Girls' Meetings' to negotiate RULES, thus setting a tradition and ethos of joint decision-making, and respect for everyone making the decisions, that holds to this day.

The girls found it difficult to be refused permission to go out, especially when there was something exciting happening on the Grand Parade, and they tended to disappear at any time of the day or night. One of the first rules negotiated, therefore, was that if a girl disappeared for a night she could not just come in and sleep all day in preparation for another night's partying. She would have to stay outside all day as if she was still living on the streets, until 6 p.m. Then she could come in and do her duties before eating and

⁵ Jane Keen *ibid.*

showering. This meant that girls had to participate at least minimally in the programme, and could not use the facilities of the home while continuing their old pattern of living on the street. Gradually, as the girls adjusted, their adherence to more rules and participation in the programme was expected.

Ons Plek's experience mirrored that of The Homestead, and differed from that of traditional children's homes. Children in children's homes have usually been removed from their homes and placed in a children's home by a children's court order. They cannot come and go as they please, and if they do they may be sent to a 'reform centre'. Street children have lived independently of adults and are more unused to structure than children in most homes. Although the staff at Ons Plek are strongly against children going off without permission, one has to accept that some will come and go without permission for at least a period of time. Many of the children have saved themselves from dangers and conflict in their family and community environments by fighting when they have a chance of winning, and otherwise fleeing the situation. Since fighting is not allowed in a place like Ons Plek, and since authority lies with the staff of the project, their remaining tried-and-tested coping mechanism is flight. The children have also often had extensive experience of adults being abusive. It therefore makes sense for them to keep running away until they have mastered new coping strategies in their new environment, and until they have reason to trust that these adults are different from those who abused them. Incarcerating children who have not committed any crime except fleeing for their lives does not help them to grow into reasonable and resourceful citizens. Instead, it continues the cycle of brute force which has traumatised the child in the first place.

This policy, known as the open door policy, is an internationally used practice to slowly wean children off the streets. It is used not because project staff are overtly permissive, but because long-term street children will simply abscond on a whim and then not feel free to ever return for help. They may also not refer themselves for help in the first place, if they think they have to give up their autonomy.

Although tolerating the habit of new girls giving themselves permission to 'take a walk', Ons Plek did not condone this. The rules stipulated that girls must ask permission and do an extra duty on their return, if they had not asked for permission. If they got into any trouble when out without permission, even if arrested, no help would be given because they were not supposed to be out in the first place.

This open door policy and practice led to more criticism from certain quarters, and great suspicion of this new service which not only was believed to house prostitutes, but appeared to exercise no discipline over the children.

The other policy which further deepened disapproval of Ons Plek was that, like The Homestead, and unlike traditional children's homes, Ons Plek geared itself to accept self-referral of children. Most children placed in homes have first been removed by a social worker from their family home, the address of which is known, because of abuse and neglect. Street children have removed themselves; they conveniently reply to any queries that there are no traceable surviving family members, and claim that they do not need adult help to survive, since they find their own food and clothes. This independence and habit of running away mean that self-referral, and allowing them time to wean themselves off the street, works more successfully than loading them into a van and locking them up in a home, an approach favoured by many City Improvement Districts (CIDs)⁶, businesses and other bodies concerned with city improvement.

So important is the policy of self-referral that any intake project for street children must

⁶ A City Improvement District is a group of businesses and other interested parties whose objectives are to upgrade the business area so that it becomes a safe and desirable place to do business.

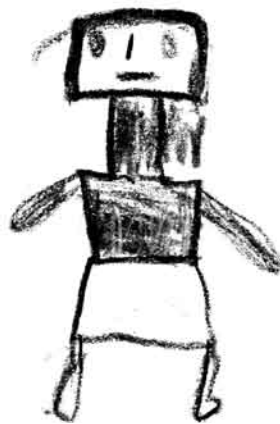
be located where the children are - which tends to be where business and money are plentiful.

Finally, to establish our bad reputation once and for all, Ons Plek allowed pregnant girls to keep their babies. We did so because decades of removing babies from girls in children's homes did not seem to have prevented the same girls from falling pregnant again. Possibly the psychological need to have someone of their own to care for drove the girls to fall pregnant again. The policy at Ons Plek was based on the reasoning that if the girl kept her baby in a supervised setting, she could avoid falling pregnant again and learn how to look after the baby.

To the best of my knowledge we became the only children's home to allow the girls to keep their babies. This does not make life rosy or easy for anyone. The girl has to look after her own baby, and not palm her off on the other girls. This was in keeping with our policy of preparing the girls for life. We taught the young mother baby care, and supervised her doing it. This was difficult for us, particularly if the mother neglected the baby. We then had to remove the baby but continue to care for the mother, keeping both child mother and baby as primary clients in our care. Most social workers in this position keep their focus on the baby's interest as the primary client. The unexpected result of allowing girls to keep their babies, and contrary to our reputation, has been that very few girls fall pregnant while at Ons Plek. Only 3 girls out of the 2 700 who have passed through Ons Plek in 17 years have done so. The majority of babies at Ons Plek, and there have only been about 38 of them, were already conceived before the mother came to us. So much for the perception that female street children have very loose morals. Few of them use contraceptives when they do have sex, so perhaps there is not quite as much sex taking place as the public perceives?

Preparing for life after Ons Plek

From the outset Ons Plek insisted on preparing the girls for future life by not increasing their standard of living to one that was too much higher than that of their home community. We do not want the girls to be unable to live in the community because life is more luxurious in a children's home. We do not want to undermine the ability of a caring relative to provide a home because they do not have the same conveniences that we can offer. In the community, girls do housework and shop. They catch taxis and third-class trains, they queue in long queues at public hospitals and walk to school. They eat samp and beans and vegetables and pap, and not so much meat. So we continue to do all this at Ons Plek. Although girls are responsible for all household duties, including washing their own clothes and walking to the shops for the weekly shop, the work is shared and it is not too onerous. Older girls are paired with younger girls to help with the cooking. Sometimes the food is burnt, the house is not quite as clean as when an adult does the cleaning, and they have to walk all the way back to the shop to return the meat because they couldn't resist buying steak instead of chicken. It would be so much easier for the staff just to order the food, and hire cleaning staff and a driver. A payoff of our approach is that when girls leave Ons Plek not only have they been educated and counselled, they also know how to shop cheaply, cook, clean and use public transport. When girls leave us they know how to access medical help, and do not sit around helpless because "the kombi always used to take us" - a response one gets from many children who grow up in children's homes where everything is done for them.



Our policy is to provide for essential items so as to meet the physical and emotional health and educational needs of the girls. This policy arises from the fact that we are working in a country where poverty is endemic. When the girls leave Ons Plek, they often return to poor communities. The standard of life at the shelter should not be unrealistically high. Rather, we should model how to live under the budget constraints they are likely to face later on. The policy on how we spend money is further dictated by the fact that we do not have much to spend, and we are responsible to our donors to spend the money in the most economical but effective way, with basic needs as the first priority.

Modelling living under budget constraints must also therefore apply to staff. Money spent on staff equipment and working conditions is certainly economically spent, with no extra frills or comforts. When we recruit new staff our advert reads, "This work will not suit someone who wants the latest equipment and deep pile carpets." The buildings are furnished with shabby but sturdy second-hand furniture, usually donated. We have managed to equip our 3 m² office with two desks, stationery, a telephone, computers and fax, but staff share these cramped facilities. Therefore, two staff members often work in the childcare worker's bedroom, on the beds. Interviews with parents and children and staff meetings are also held on these beds.

Nontobeko Moni, then a childcare worker, was once heard to grumble, "At home my visitors come in and sit on my bed to talk. At work visitors come in and sit on my bed. And now, there's a staff meeting, and where are they going to sit? Same place again!"

Working at Ons Plek

In May 1989 I reluctantly joined the childcare workers, Nontobeko Moni, Roslyn Martin and Joyce Mateta, as unit manager and social worker of Ons Plek. Only because I needed a job. I had worked with street people in Johannesburg. I had no intention of staying long, and I knew there would be few successes. Within a week of starting, my heart was captivated.

I loved the vitality and vibrancy with which the girls lived, despite the sadness in their lives. I loved the emphasis of Cheryl Snyman, one of the first people to act as chairperson of the Ons Plek committee, who set the tone for everyone. Cheryl spent a lot of time on the street with the girls, and shared her experiences with the committee so that they were in touch with the needs of the girls. She knew how difficult it was for women who look after the children in their care at work, but also have children of their own at home to care for. So Ons Plek became a place for girls cared for by women who tried to balance their professional lives, but not at the expense of their own children's needs. I loved the energy and involvement of the committee who then, as now, became involved because of a genuine commitment to the work, and whose support and loyalty are tangible at Ons Plek.

Almost the first thing that Jane involved me in was a course to brush up my self-protection skills. This entailed fighting with real knives. Truly, this was a bizarre and difficult job, and there were more difficulties to come.

One thing sustained me throughout all of Ons Plek's adventures. Sadie Stegmann, one of Ons Plek's first committee members, had shared with me some coincidences which she

thank you to give me a chance to see my Mom and Dad and everybody in the family. thank you to send Auntie Joyce to bring me to Ons Plek. FROM NOLUKHLO

felt were miraculous, that had enabled Ons Plek to open. She assured me that Ons Plek was God's project. I need not worry, she said - which being of little faith, I nevertheless did. However, I have come to believe in Sadie's words.

For the next ten months I sat every day in an office with a huge hole in the ceiling, under which my desk was placed. It was the duty of one of the girls to clean my office, a job done too enthusiastically for my liking when it came to tidying papers and files. I could never find reports that I had been busy with the day before, and the papers, and I, were constantly covered with a layer of century-old dust that filtered down through the hole in the ceiling.

The girls had all been on the street for some time, and they were wild. It took all our energy to stay a step ahead of them when implementing the rules we had set together with them. It required anticipating the myriad ways in which girls could break any rule, and trying to circumvent that in advance, a skill at which I became a master.

On top of these worries there was the small matter of finances. Ons Plek got deeper and deeper into debt. It took four years for the state to register the project and provide some help in this regard.

For those early years I felt as if I was sitting on a volcano that could - and sometimes did - blow at any time. But there was an atmosphere of togetherness among girls and staff. We did not have much, and we shared everything. From the beginning until now, our policy has been that staff on duty do not live at a higher standard than the girls. Staff ate with the girls, watched television with the girls, walked to the shop with the girls, and caught the taxi on home visits with the girls.

In March 1990 the house burnt down. Although firemen blamed electrical wires, each of us wondered silently who had broken the ban on smoking upstairs. When we moved back after the fire, the office had a new ceiling with no hole in it and the hole in the bank balance had been filled by donations that poured in because of all the publicity about the fire.

I wish that we can be save and may God love you all. from Christeline

A year later our bank balance began dropping again, and it was clear that despite my best efforts, I could not run the organisation, do all the social work counselling, raise funds, train staff, etc. Even after training the staff to do initial social work interviews, there was too much work to handle. I was so busy dealing with crises in the girls' lives that I rarely wrote the court reports which would enable Ons Plek to claim the small subsidy available to homes. The committee, who were wonderfully supportive, did not have time to fundraise adequately. If we employed a part-time social auxiliary worker to do investigations and court reports, we could claim the government subsidy for each girl. This would pay the auxiliary worker's salary. And it would give me a few more minutes to fundraise to keep the bank balance in the black from now on. It was time to expand!

I asked the committee to employ volunteer and committee member Renée Rossouw, whom I judged to be sufficiently alternative in her approach, flexible, intuitive, committed and smart enough to handle the ever turbulent, sometimes frightening, always exciting world of children who have lived on the streets. And she was all of those things.

With Renée assisting me with so much more than she had been appointed to do, I had

time to attend to the opening of a second-stage home. Many of the girls went back to school enthusiastically once they had settled down at Ons Plek, only to drop out a few weeks later. It was very difficult for them to keep to the discipline of a school day while other new girls basked in the sun. These girls were not settled enough to be accepted into another children's home, not ready yet to go back to their family homes, and yet had the potential to grow out of their unsettled street child phase if they could be separated from the influence of the new arrivals at Ons Plek.

Following The Homestead's lead and the example of international practice, our second-stage home was opened in 1993. The girls and staff named it Siviwe, meaning 'God has heard us'. It was located in Woodstock, about two kilometres from Ons Plek, to maintain sufficient contact between staff and children without the two groups being in each other's pockets. The girls were free of each other's influence, but Ons Plek girls could still aspire to move to Siviwe.

There were dangers in the starting of a second phase. I have noticed again and again in social work that services are started for a difficult group of clients.

After a time, staff are tired of the difficulties and the low potential for their clients to change. That is when the service becomes more exclusive; those with the most potential are focused on and the most difficult clients with the lowest level of potential are once again left without services. I saw potential for Siviwe staff to become used to easier children than those at Ons Plek. In time they might refuse to take Ons Plek's ready-to-move, but still difficult, children into Siviwe, which was what many children's homes were doing. Therefore, Ons Plek and Siviwe staff continued to meet every Friday as one team to discuss the children, and staff did shifts at both houses. The children did activities together at times.

Since 1994, life at Ons Plek has become less hectic than it used to be. Knife fights have become a thing of the past - almost. Drink and thinners abuse, and sometimes bunking school, keep us trying to be sharper than sharp. But the number of children who come in straight from the street has dropped considerably. For a number of years our existence has prevented children from ever becoming street children. Community members refer children who are just beginning to drop out of home but are still in the community. Children are referred to us as they arrive in Cape Town. They are much easier to help than those who have lived on the street. The children are also younger than before. Our ability to help has become stronger over the years.

Our aims and methods: A formal statement

With some of the initial teething difficulties of starting a new project with minimal resources behind us, I was able to focus more on fundraising.

The writing of many proposals over the years has led to a formalised way of expressing what we are doing. The aims and the method of Ons Plek were formalised as follows:

Aim 1:

To prevent the phenomenon of female street children.

How: *The most effective way of doing this would be to implement several community prevention programmes in the many poverty-stricken areas in and around Cape Town. As a small group of women, however, our resources are most effective in the Central Business*

District to which children from all communities run. By providing shelter/accommodation we prevent the children from learning how to live on the streets as well as keeping them safe, which makes interventions easier to implement. Successful and permanent reunification with family takes skilled counselling and time. In the current situation, for maximum effectiveness, a shelter programme situated in the CBD is an essential component in achieving our aim. Were we to move into a community, we would only help potential street children of that community.⁷

Comment: Out of the 150 new girls **per year** running to the streets, only an average of 7 are on the streets each year since Ons Plek Projects started. People refer runaways to us as they arrive in town.

Aim 2:

The first priority is to contact estranged family members to see if the child can return home.

How: The relationship between child and family is focused on. Parenting skills and conflict resolution are looked at. Stress levels are reduced by referral to a supportive welfare organisation, who assist the family by means of grants, employment and empowerment techniques.

Comment: By making this a priority Ons Plek has placed 50 to 70 per cent of our yearly intake back in the community on a long-term basis, with either immediate or extended family members. Whole families have thus been empowered, rather than only helping the child who has run away. The number of children growing up in the unnatural setting of a children's home, dependent on the public, is thus reduced.

Dear God, thank you
God for what you've
done for me to give me
a place to stay and
people that I can talk to
them about my personal
life and understand
my problems. from
Thoneka

Aim 3:

The girls are empowered by instilling a sense of responsibility for themselves and for what happens in their lives.

How: The foundation for responsibility is that the girls are responsible for the home they live in. Every girl must participate in household duties. They are taught how to care for property e.g. electrical appliances, such as a washing machine, iron, sewing machine, etc. and how to do domestic chores. Any breakages are paid for by the girls themselves to teach them responsibility. **Ons Plek has no domestic help.** This foundation of responsibility is built on

by involving girls in every decision regarding their lives.

Comment: Children in children's homes grow up expecting the public or staff to do everything for them, which does not prepare them for adulthood. However, most Ons Plek girls are unlikely to employ domestic workers and do not get a false expectation of life through having duties done for them.

Aim 4:

Preparing girls to attend school or work. This involves improvement of concentration levels to enable the children to return to school after lengthy periods away from school.

How: Basic educational activities in a lively interactive format for an hour at a time, which also improve coordination necessary to manipulate a pen e.g. drawing, modern dancing, arts

and crafts. School activities such as reading, writing and arithmetic are included according to the child's ability and potential. The child's level of education and ability is assessed by our teachers and if necessary by a specialist, prior to seeking an appropriate school placement.

Comment: Many have not concentrated on anything for as long as an hour and are not used to forcing themselves to attend any activity regularly and to its conclusion. In addition, very few have been through the necessary preparation for school i.e. pre-primary school.

Aim 5:

To enrol the girls at a school programme for street children (when not ready for formal school), employment, training courses or formal employment.

How: We run a vocational skills development programme, which includes training in study methods, communication skills, a programme of craft and selling skills and a homework support programme. The homework organiser and a team of volunteers see each student daily, because the children are so far behind in the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Comment: Eighty-five to ninety-five per cent of girls return to school and most of the rest of the girls participate in the other vocational skills development activities. Due to the nature of a street child's developmental impairment, implementing any of these programmes requires considerable input of time and effort by staff.

Aim 6:

To maximise the possibility of coping in and participating in normal society.

How: Girls move on to the second-stage residential shelter, Siviwe, where expectations and responsibilities are greater and treatment programmes more intense.

Comment: Separate shelters are needed to meet the needs of more settled school-going children and those of children still ensnared by street life.

Aim 7:

Relationship skills and other lifeskills are all-important for the success of future family and work prospects.

How: These are taught through: individual and family counselling, conflict resolution among the girls and staff in house meetings, role play and discussion of wife-battering, sex education, substance abuse, AIDS, etc. held in groups.

Comment: Involvement in house meetings convinces them that they have a voice which can be heard, ideas to resolve problems and, with support from staff, the ability to implement those ideas.

Aim 8:

To lobby powerful institutions, local and national, to address the plight of street children, particularly female children, in policies and resources.

How: We participate in provincial, city and national committees, network with other NGOs, write to newspapers, give talks, etc.

Comment: In addition we spend hours in ensuring justice and dignity for the approximately 70 per cent of our girls who have been raped, usually more than once. This means talking to police and to prosecutors in our overburdened and dysfunctional justice system. Preparation counselling for the girls, as well as being therapeutic, also trains the girls to have faith in their story, in their value and in their ability to speak for themselves and gain their rights.

⁷ See page 18 further on in this chapter under 'Extending Support into the Community' where we describe Ukondla, our first project in a community.

Extending support into the community

Having for years been aware of the need to embark on a more preventative approach in the community, in April 2003 we seized the opportunity to open a project in Philippi funded by the Provincial Administration of the Western Cape (PAWC) Social Services, partnered by The Homestead and Salesians. The project is called Ukondla, which means 'nourishing'. Our part of the work was to open a foster care programme in Philippi. Most of our children come from Philippi. Our aim was to foster them in the community shortly after their admission to Ons Plek, and thus to achieve more effective reunification with their families who live close by. In so doing, we train the foster parents in many aspects of childcare, thereby making them informed resources for their neighbours. The project soon developed into a homework support resource for the foster children (to make sure they stayed in school) and for other community children at risk of dropping out of school - which tends to be the first step towards dropping out of home.

The working team at Ons Plek

Renée and I have led the Ons Plek team in starting a school and homework programme at Ons Plek; experimenting with small business projects for the girls; opening the second-stage home, Siviwe, and developing Ukondla in Philippi. Since Ons Plek opened, our staff numbers have increased from four to eighteen, crammed into every available corner of our buildings. We have formed a close-knit team, some team members having stayed with the project for a good proportion of its existence. Childcare workers Joyce Mateta and Nontobeko Moni reached the twelve-year and fifteen-year mark of long

service respectively, and have been emulated in this by Faniswa Muba and Joyce Sethole, who are in their twelfth and eleventh years respectively.

Dear God. thank
you for helping
me through
this days. Thank
you for guiding
children on the
streets. You are
amazing God. You
died for our sins.
From nosivlwe

Staff have listened to countless stories of neglect, abandonment, abuse and rape and have often gone home with heavy hearts. We have held weeping girls at funerals and we have celebrated at weddings. Our hearts have been broken by several girls who found change too hard and dropped out of the programme. We have celebrated the reunion of long-lost family members and successes at school. And we have laughed, laughed at the amazing tricks of the girls, laughed at our responses and the situations we have ended up in. Childcare workers, particularly, have trudged through heat and dust or rain and mud on many township roads, or no roads, searching for family members. All staff have climbed over piles of

donations to get to their desks, sat on the floor or stairs to work, interviewed children, parents and even funders on beds because offices are always full, persevered with work trying to block out the sound of noisy children, run to hide the kitchen knives in the event of a fight and turned a deaf ear when sworn at.

Periodically the committee suggests that we move our administrative staff to a separate head office. I always decline, because I believe it is important to stay in touch with the issues confronting the girls we are there to help, and our work setting reflects the way most South Africans live.

When tired, we are tempted to say no to admitting some girls who we can predict are unlikely to succeed. Often we have fingers pointed at us because we have not succeeded. I have watched many organisations graduate from helping those most in need to helping those who are easier to help. I hope we never do that.

The staff gather for a meeting every Friday to share the successes and challenges of the project and to problem-solve. The information every staff member has on each girl is shared. This is when we cement our efforts, and move forward together.

Every two weeks we hold a girls' meeting to discuss any matters bothering the staff members or girls which have an impact on the whole house. Sometimes the meetings are quiet and sad, at other times boisterous and fun or full of arguments and anger. The meetings are there to provide formal processes of joint problem-solving and conflict resolution.

Assessing our achievements

Renée has written about the purpose and value of Ons Plek's work in terms that express our overall sense of why we do what we do:

The touchstone of the work at Ons Plek is a sense of the inherent dignity and equality of all people, and the belief that each human being can bring about change and growth in her own life, so much more so if she is given good opportunities for growth. Ons Plek started in 1988, when many basic human rights were illegal in South Africa. Basic human rights are now enshrined in our Constitution, but endemic poverty makes these rights hard for many people to access. Accessing rights and learning responsibility are an important part of what the work at Ons Plek entails, but the focus is on inherent human dignity, that which laws, circumstances and personal choices can enhance or obscure, but which ultimately can neither be taken nor given away. The dream for each girl is that rich, happy, good, whole and peaceful life.

The primary discipline that informs the work of Ons Plek is that of social work, ably disseminated and applied by Pam over the years. With that at the core, the other members of the staff team have kept bringing a variety of skills, knowledge, cultural experience, spiritual gifts and insights, and the gifts of their training and experience, especially in child and youth development.

The work at Ons Plek is in the first and last place done by the girls themselves. They are the people who make new plans, learn new skills, choose to stay and sort out problems in difficult and unfamiliar ways, move away from self-defeating habits and learn new ones (and is that not something we all struggle with?), embrace estranged relatives, have courage when all seems bleak and lonely, engage with new ways of being part of a household and new levels of discipline, go to school, and so on. It is the child who climbs, builds, hides, learns, tries, lives, laughs, cries and weaves meaning out of it all.

But without the short- or longer-term intervention of Ons Plek staff, volunteers, board, members and friends, as Nontobeko's image expresses it so well, the eagle swoops and carries away some of the chicks.

The projects have maintained the following high record of success consistently over the years:

- Ons Plek rescues approximately 130 runaway girls per year from street life.
- We re-unite an average of 50 per cent of the annual intake with their families and relatives, usually in the first two months of their stay. Although the emphasis is on moving girls out of institutional care as soon as possible, the families and relatives of some girls are not suitable to care for children. In the long run we reunite 95 per cent with their families/communities.
- Between 5 and 10 per cent of girls drop out of the programme every year. The remainder stay in the programme for a period ranging from 3 months to 5 years.
- About 85 per cent of the children go back to formal schooling and the others attend our informal school. Since the inception of our homework project, all girls at Ons Plek have progressed markedly in their education.
- The key to our success is providing 24-hour accommodation, counselling and education while undertaking the complex reunification process. All programmes are thus integrated and the easy flow between them makes for a holistic treatment programme.

While we are happy about the girls who go back to school and home, we count the small changes in each girl's life as successes.

Samantha and Chantal's story continued...

Samantha and Chantal, two of the girls who timidly presented themselves at Ons Plek for help, left us as very different people. Chantal blossomed into an enthusiastic, confident girl and went to live with an aunt - in a house.

Samantha, who was extremely thin on arrival, went through a period of grabbing food and wolfing it down, stealing from the pantry and wetting her bed every night. She did not talk except to answer questions with a brief "ja" or "nee". And she trembled all the time. Week after week Samantha drew the same black and brown, childish yacht in her art sessions with Renée, who was then a volunteer at Ons Plek.

At the age of 15, Samantha had only attended school erratically until Grade three. The team felt that, with the psychological handicaps she had, she would benefit more from staying at home in the presence of the childcare worker than from restarting school. Within two years the bedwetting had decreased to once a week, she could engage in conversation and she took responsibility for locking the house overnight. She continued to draw the same yacht, but gradually had included a blue sky and sea, birds flying past and a colourful sail. She had grown in confidence, and her world view had lightened up considerably.

Throughout her years at Ons Plek Samantha kept up the connections she had made on the street. To walk through town with Samantha meant being greeted by stallholders, street vendors and shop owners. The centre of Cape Town was Samantha's world, the world she was at home in. When we found her a job she turned it down and left to share a flat with two friends. She worked on an ad hoc basis helping her various informal business connections and getting support from them.

Chantal had gone back to school and later held down a steady job - the criteria of some people for a successful graduate from a shelter. Against these criteria Samantha would be judged a failure. She left Ons Plek no longer a victim, her self-esteem and confidence restored, able to hold her own and be respected in her little world. She is an Ons Plek-type success: someone for whom life has changed in ways that make a difference.

