



The literacy programme is “uplifting” and for many people it’s “a way to counter alcoholism”. Photos: Lisa Skinner

‘A’ is for a new life

Illiterate white people are benefitting from government’s adult education initiative, writes **Cornia Pretorius**

Number 887 Botha Street in Hermanstad appears to be just another house in the west of Pretoria.

Inside the palisade fence facing the street are a caged white cockatoo and a bouncy dog that answers to the name “Wollie”. But walk down a cement driveway and it becomes obvious that this is more like a small village.

In the shade of a substantial tree, a few oumatjies (grannies), their faces badly wrinkled by bad habits and old age, are taking a break from peeling a pile of carrots for lunch-time soup. Between stained fingers they clutch cigarettes and mugs of strong tea. They are listening to a chorus of voices counting monotonously in Afrikaans from a nearby room: “Een, twee, drie ...”

Inside, 20 white adults are squashed around two large dining-room tables. They stop counting as volunteer educator Cyndi Macgregor rules it’s time for the class to move on to another section in their colourful numeracy books.

They have to look at a pattern: a bunch of grapes, a banana, cherries and an apple, and draw the missing fruit in the same series.

“Grapes, banana and ... what comes next?” Macgregor asks. The learners proceed with zeal. As they complete the exercise, she introduces some of them: “There’s Thomas. He’s a real star; he wants to go back to farming. Corrie can’t write, but she’s excellent at maths. Gerda was in an accident. She’s good with numbers, but can’t spell.”

The one thing that binds the learners under Macgregor and her fellow teacher, Ronel Enslin, is that they are functionally illiterate. Some never learnt to read and write. Others simply failed to take full control of the ABC ... and the 1,2,3 ... because of poverty, mental illness and misfortune.



Some people fail to take control of the ABC because of poverty, mental illness and misfortune

This is why many of the adult learners are living at 887 Botha Street. Better known as Uncle Ben’s Den, it can be described as a white squatter camp, but unlike the corrugated silver cities of their black fellow citizens, at this address people live in wooden and brick and mortar structures.

Here one of the world’s selfless souls, Auntie Sharon de Lange, and her family have created a shelter stretching across four stands to take care of the elderly and the jobless, together with their families, their earthly possessions and even their minds.

Some residents have been discharged from the nearby Weskoppies psychiatric hospital, but struggle to regrow their roots in a society that remains overwhelmingly intolerant of the mentally ill.

There are 77 similar squatter camps in the greater Tshwane area alone and an estimated 1 000 across the country, mostly occupied by Afrikaners.

This is a post-democracy phenomenon.

When job reservation for unschooled and semi-schooled whites was abolished in the mid-1990s, they suddenly had no government gardens to tend or roads to build.

This is perhaps why they react to the opportunity to learn again – as part of the government’s multimillion-rand Kha Ri Gude adult literacy campaign – with some disbelief.

The very government that so many of them blame for taking away their meagre livelihoods has promised and delivered.

Lizette Stols, a supervisor for the Kha Ri Gude campaign at these white shelters, explains: “These centres have never received help from the government because they are only for white people. Now the government has given.

“It’s uplifting, a way to counter alcoholism and women abuse. It gives people their dignity back. It’s the first time in years they’ve received something they were promised.”

The 50 learners at Uncle Ben’s Den who are attending the literacy lessons are among the Kha Ri Gude campaign’s first intake of about 2 000 white people. The move followed talks earlier this year between trade union Solidarity’s social welfare arm, Helping Hand, and the education department.

Former education minister Naledi Pandor and Kha Ri Gude chief executive Veronica McKay agreed that the campaign should be for all South Africans and be extended to these areas if Solidarity identified the learners and organised the volunteer educators needed to roll out the initiative in unknown territory.

“The fact that we developed the materials in 11 languages, including Afrikaans, meant that we could proceed quickly,” says McKay.

She has visited several of the new sites and the levels of illiteracy among whites came as a surprise.

“One 17-year-old I encountered did not know how to hold a book – which side is up. He never went to school. His father could also not read and he stayed with his grandmother who said he had to work at the house,” McKay said.

Although the second year of the Kha Ri Gude campaign has just taken off – lessons started last month – the enthusiasm of the volunteer educators and their learners is tangible.

Jannie Nel (43), a resident of Uncle Ben’s Den, says he loves doing maths and Afrikaans.

“It’s interesting. It stops me from thinking about the border,” Nel says.

He went “bossies” during the war in former South West Africa and Angola and spent eight years in Weskoppies psychiatric hospital before being released a few years ago.

As a child, he says, he attended a special school, but clearly did not master reading and writing.

Jannie de Jong, another of the learners, has a similar story. Born deaf, he also went to a special school, but says he only learnt woodwork. When his parents died, family members committed him to Weskoppies mental hospital, apparently wrongly, before he was “discovered”.

“I laaik learning to read and write. I want to be able to spell words and read books. I love doing my homework,” he says.

Fifteen minutes’ drive from Uncle Ben’s Den is another camp, Kwaggaspoort Reddingsdaad. It consists of a big hall-like building that was once an army studio and later a film studio, surrounded by wooden structures where families live.

Kha Ri Gude learners sit at tables in the kind winter sun or in the shade of a palm tree and a jacaranda. Aged 12 to 68, learners include young girls with flawless skins, men in dirty vests and aged aunties with gold-rimmed spectacles and bright warm scarves, all learning together.

Ann Greef, one of the oldest, remarks that she is probably wearing “some dead man’s glasses [donated to the residents], but what can you do?”

She only went to school up to standard six (grade eight) and feels she is rediscovering words that she had completely forgotten.

“We were rich. We lost everything in a bad flood years ago and since then we’ve been battling. My husband’s a plumber, but when he looks for work everyone tells him he’s too old. So we ended up here,” Greeff explains.

Sitting alone at another table is “KP”. He never attended school “because I was thrown away as a baby”. Behind him is a 16-year-old girl who battles to hold the scissors she is using to cut out words. Next to her is her 12-year-old sister and opposite them, their mother.

The sisters dropped out of school without being able to read. The younger girl started failing after she was raped while their mother was in jail.

These young learners are likely to benefit most from their inclusion into the campaign.

Dawie Theron was closely involved in getting the Kha Ri Gude campaign into the shelters and works for the Dutch Reformed Church’s poverty alleviation initiative. For the youngsters, he says, it could serve as a springboard for other training

opportunities and could help them take their place in society.

Theron says that although some have criticised the inclusion of mentally handicapped people, the opportunity to learn is enhancing their quality of life and giving them some tools to survive in the world.

“The inclusion of whites in the Kha Ri Gude is a tremendously positive move and there is great appreciation for the initiative,” he said.

“We accept that the problem of so-called white poverty is hardly significant in the South African context. But this is a sign that the government, Jacob Zuma in particular, has started to acknowledge it.”