


The forgotten young

BY HEATHER DUGMORE





..... (L-R) Project Coordinator for Action Volunteers Africa (AVA) Yvette Moses, AVA intern and ex-recruit Lindiwe Sishuba, AVA intern Siyabonga Dingela and Lisa Garson



They're young, they're unskilled, they don't have jobs, most are not well educated and they are sitting at home not knowing what to do. Wits BSc alumna Lisa Garson has a plan.

LISA GARSON GRADUATED FROM WITS WITH HER BSC IN 1989 AND BSC HONS IN 1990.

There are millions of very frightened young South Africans who are facing bleak futures and losing hope fast. These are not the promising achievers that universities, colleges, industry and youth advancement programmes are looking for. Quite the opposite; they don't have good track records or academic profiles or anything with which to sell themselves. And they don't know where to turn.

That's where Lisa Garson comes in. For most of her life, she has been driven to make a difference to the lives of young South Africans who come from difficult and impoverished backgrounds.

Two years ago she established an NGO called Action Volunteers Africa (AVA) in Cape Town to place young people from townships around Cape Town who are not in employment, education or training (known as NEETS) in NGOs as volunteers and interns to gain skills and much-needed work experience.

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More than 3.7-million NEETS

"In the 18-25 age group South Africa has more than 3.7-million NEETS. They have been churned out through one of the worst education systems in the world and then little is done to help them progress after leaving school. The result is a rapidly growing group of young people whom everyone forgets. I looked at this group and thought that something needs to be done about this," says Cape Town-based Garson, who is the founder and director of a successful placement agency for NGOs in South Africa and Africa. Established 20 years ago, it is called Action Appointments Development Recruitment.

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"Knowing the NGO environment as I do, I decided to approach several Cape Town-based NGOs – such as the Red Cross Children's Hospital, the SPCA and Afrika Tikkun – to partner with the AVA model," says Garson, who set up an AVA office in Claremont.

"The NGOs receive R750 per month per recruit and in turn they help the recruit to learn skills and to be mentored. The NGOs also benefit from an extra person helping them, and all NGOs need this."

Computer skills, personal branding skills

All recruits are screened and interviewed by Garson and participate in the AVA orientation programme before starting work. Aspects covered include a basic introduction to computers and using the Internet, interview skills and an introduction to NGOs.

Recruits also attend a monthly motivation forum where they acquire a range of navigational skills, including career guidance, how to look for opportunities, personal branding, producing a CV, networking and communication and how to deal with stress. Each recruit also gets a small monthly stipend. "Poverty levels are dire in their homes and many of them use the stipend to put food on the table," says Garson.



Body maps and vision boards

As part of the programme the recruits create body maps and vision boards. "We work with an art facilitator and the recruits create artworks about themselves, which express how they see themselves, how others see them and what they hope for in their future, based on realistic career goals," Garson explains.

They take the vision boards home and put them up on a wall where they can look at them regularly, which helps them to start internalising how they want to see themselves and what they want to achieve.



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100 AVA recruits in two years

“The aim is for recruits to be employed for up to one year with the host NGOs,” says Garson, who, over the past two years, has placed over 90 AVA recruits.

What she is doing is as rewarding as it is heartbreaking.

“These young people have never been given a chance in life. Many come from very dysfunctional backgrounds where drug abuse, joblessness and violence is endemic,” she explains.

“Many have no emotional coping skills and when something goes wrong at home or a parent tells them to stay at home, that is what they do. We teach them that being employed and being reliable is hard work, and that it takes stamina and dedication to turn up at work no matter what is happening in their lives.”

Their body language changes

Given a bit of a start in life, many of the recruits start transforming – they become stronger and more confident, their body language changes and they are able to find solutions. Several are now employed.

One of them is a 2013 recruit, 20-year-old Siphumelele Zibi, from the Eastern Cape, who lives in Khayelitsha. His mother moved the family there so that she could look for work after his father abandoned them. Zibi was in Grade 10 at the time.

His dream is to work in conservation but he didn’t have a science or maths teacher for the last two years of school, which meant he didn’t achieve the marks required to study in that field.

“We didn’t have a conservation NGO placement opportunity so we decided to place him with the SPCA in Grassy Park because he is passionate about animals,” says Garson.

2013 AVA recruits, 20-year-old Muneeba Maart from Retreat and 22-year-old Siphumelele Zibi, from the Eastern Cape



Used his networking skills

Travelling to Grassy Park each day and working long hours, often doing extremely menial work, was not easy but he showed great commitment and great care for the animals. After eight months he used the networking skills he developed on the programme to secure a job at the Tygerberg Animal Hospital.

The HR manager at the Tygerberg Animal Hospital contacted AVA and the SPCA for a reference, and they could both vouch for him. He is now a permanent staff member there; he supports his mother and sister, and still plans to study conservation one day.

Another successful placement is 18-year-old Muneeba Maart from Retreat, who had just had a baby when she joined the AVA programme at the beginning of 2013.

"It's far from ideal to take on recruits with babies because it makes organising their lives far more difficult, but the reality is that many of these young people already have children," says Garson.

Muneeba was really battling with life when she was placed as a teacher's assistant at Capricorn Primary in an informal settlement near Muizenberg called Vrygrond. She proved to be very good with children and has since been offered a fulltime job and the opportunity to study through Unisa to become a teacher.

Long, hard, close-up look at our youth

"Over the past two years, I have met and come to know many young people like Siphumelele and Muneeba, and I have had the opportunity to take a long, hard, close-up look at the state of our youth.

"From this I have learnt a lot," says Garson.

"I have learnt that even though young people in our country are rebellious, fun-loving, materialistic and narcissistic, they are also willing, tenacious, determined and courageous. Basically, they're like most young people across the world, facing the chasm between school and the adult world of work.

Our youth are very frightened

"The difference is that our youth are also very frightened because they have no prospects. When I interview them to become recruits, they don't come up with fancy reasons why they want to be chosen; most say it's because they don't want to sit at home doing nothing."

Garson funded AVA from her recruitment business for the first six months and has since been fund-raising.

"I don't like fund-raising but there is no alternative if we are to grow the programme," she says. She has since received funding from a range of organisations, including Discovery, the DG Murray Trust and the Christian Development Trust.

Funders recognise it as an excellent model that is extremely cost effective and it works.

AVA is currently only in Cape Town. Garson's next challenge is to have AVA offices all over South Africa, and she is already working on this. "That's my big dream."

FOR MORE INFORMATION
GO TO WWW.AVAFRICA.ORG.ZA

Lisa Garson and her sisters, Catherine, Fiona and Philippa, grew up at Wits. Their father, Noel Garson, was Head of History, Dean of Arts, and member of Council during his 1957 to 1996 tenure at the University. Their mother, Yvonne, was a librarian at the William Cullen. Both are 82 now and still active.

witspedigree

"My childhood sights, sounds and smells are from Wits," says Lisa. "I vividly remember the smell of the corridors of

Central Block, where my Dad had his office in the left hand corner on the ground floor. I remember skidding down the beautifully polished floors, and being fascinated by the Koi fish in the huge pond outside his office window.

"I even learnt to swim at Wits, with the terrifying Mr Macfarlane. I can still hear his harsh reprimands when we did something wrong. He would film us swimming to show us where we went wrong – pretty advanced for the 1960s. Thanks to him I can swim very well."

Alumni Relations

All four sisters are Wits alumnae and three of their husbands are alumni. Catherine holds a postgraduate diploma in Education (1981) and a BA Hons (Translation Studies) (2009). She is a freelance editor specialising in policy and economic research on developing countries, and is also writing a novel.

Fiona (BArch 1988) taught a foundation programme at Wits for 10 years that aimed to help disadvantaged students cope with the architectural degree.

She and her business partner, Nina Cohen, won the competition to design the Wits Art Museum. They continue to work on University architectural projects. Fiona is married to Dr Robbie Potenza (MBBCh 1986), a GP in private practice.

Philippa holds a BA Hons (Politics) (1989) and is a freelance journalist. She previously worked at the *Mail & Guardian*. She married psychiatrist Dr Charles Perkel (MBCCh 1985). They live in New York.

Lisa was previously married to Dugan Fraser (MA Sociology, 1995), who is now at the RAITH Foundation.

First-Year: 1976

The sisters were aware of apartheid from a young age. "Through our parents we knew exactly what was happening here," says Lisa, whose first year was 1976, when the Soweto uprisings happened. The deaths were so shocking for Lisa that she battled to focus on her studies.

"Everything was in chaos and campus was ablaze," she recalls. "I was depressed about South Africa. I thought Madiba would spend his life in jail and that nothing would ever change."

The Garson clan: All four of the Garson sisters are Wits alumnae and three of their husbands are alumni. Photo courtesy of Lisa Garson.



“MY CHILDHOOD SIGHTS, SOUNDS AND SMELLS ARE FROM WITS”

She abandoned university, moved to Australia for seven years and became a tax assessor. But she could not get South Africa out of her system and returned home.

“I felt that I couldn’t be out of my country any longer. I was obsessed with South Africa all the while I was in Australia. South Africa is not an easy country to leave,” she says.

Lisa returned, enrolled for a BSc, moved into a commune in Yeoville, and ran an educational programme called the German Academic Exchange Enrichment Programme (GAEEP).

“It was a part-time job where a group of Wits students tutored 150 Grade 11 and 12 learners from Pretoria’s townships. Fiona taught Biology and she was a very good teacher,” Lisa recalls.

A green Beetle

Lisa’s battered green VW Beetle, loaded with an urn, 150 cups and a huge TV, was a familiar sight in Yeoville. “We showed the learners struggle movies, like *The Battle for Algiers*, after lessons. We were obsessed with being relevant,” she smiles.

After graduating BSc Hons in 1990, Lisa joined the Science Education Project, a national supplementary education system that regrettably no longer exists. “I was the HR manager and we grew the project from 30 staff to 100 in one year,” says Lisa.

Offspring

In 1990 Lisa married Dugan. They adopted two children and she gave birth to two.

“Our adopted children were the grandchildren of Deborah Malebe, who worked for my parents for 25 years,” explains Lisa. “Deborah had raised Maphiri and Lefiri, and we adopted them after she died.”

Maphiri, 31, works in Human Resources at Wits, and is studying for a BA. Lefiri studied sound engineering and lives in Fish Hoek. Callum, 19, is at UCT and Oona Jane, 16, in high school.

Lisa and Dugan divorced amicably in 2000.

Late Activism

“I moved to Cape Town from Joburg seven years ago because I found it nerve-racking raising teenagers in Joburg,” says Lisa. “I’m very connected to the natural environment and I wanted them to experience this. I felt Cape Town offered a better lifestyle for them.

While we have experienced this, I must add that Cape Town is still very much a city divided, with an extreme divide between the have’s and have not’s. This is what has made me become so much more of an activist in my later life.”