



MELANIE BURKE, FOUNDED MEMBER AND NEW CHAIRPERSON OF STREETSMART SA, REFLECTS ON HOW THE NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION HAS USED GOOD FOOD TO MAKE AN IMPACT OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS

As a musician, my father was well-travelled and always shared stories from his trips, specifically about the disparities in SA. They were never told with malice; only with a searching awareness of the possibility of how people can come together to break bread to overcome these disparities. He died when I was nine, but he left me with an incredible curiosity about the world beyond the boundaries of the township.

My three siblings and I were raised by our widowed mother in Uitenhage, near Port Elizabeth. Food was a functional necessity – we ate to live. My mother was a good cook, yet I never learnt to cook at home. At the age of 12, I was awarded an academic scholarship and went away to boarding school. I don't have to tell you what the fare there did to my already underdeveloped sense of food! It was a joke in my family that I produced the same kind of slop I ate at school. My brothers still tell the story of my macaroni and cheese dish – apparently I baked the whole thing without cooking the pasta first!

The boarding school I attended was originally an all-boys school and we were of the early intake of girls to the

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school. As you can imagine, the meals focused on providing what growing boys needed: starch and carbs. I started to think about food and nutrition at boarding school and worked hard to establish a food committee to improve the kind of options available. Whenever I go back to school for a visit, I am amazed at the healthy choices available now. I'd like to think that our group started this process more than 30 years ago.

Most of my 25 years of working experience has been in the business sector, with a focus on banking services and information technology. Since 2004, as a social and impact entrepreneur, I have built my own successful consulting business and shareholdings in complementary companies. My company focuses on the building of capacity in people and organisations, through the use of technology, systems, processes and other business innovations and support mechanisms that create commercial value along with social impact and sustainability.

I have been privileged to enjoy an educational experience that set me up for a way of being in the world. It exposed me to the unique attributes of others and how bringing these together can create a more conscious engagement with life. In our home, we learnt how to make something out of nothing, how to contribute rather than consume, and how to be of service.

I started paying attention to the art of cooking when I met my husband. He is a foodie and instilled in me an appreciation for fine cuisine. Even though my cooking skills have improved dramatically, I love nothing more than my husband cooking his famous seafood risotto for me. I am also blessed to have two wonderful stepchildren, Martin and Stephanie,

who are passionate about making a contribution to the world. Similarly, my husband is an incredible supporter of StreetSmart and refuses to dine in a restaurant that is not involved with StreetSmart. He hands out the StreetSmart-responsible restaurant guides widely.

Being involved with StreetSmart SA opened up a bigger view into the world of food for me. It is a conduit fundraising organisation that invites restaurants to become members. In turn, the restaurants invite diners to add a voluntary R5 per table to their bill. The restaurants then pay this money over to StreetSmart. In this way, funds are raised for beneficiary organisations that work with street- and other vulnerable children. StreetSmart funds education, skills development and family reunification programmes, which give children an opportunity for a viable life.

We are working hard to sign up many more restaurants nationally and expand the support we provide in the form of funding to our beneficiary organisations. Our target this year is to have 10 more eateries that are StreetSmart. This will get us to 100 restaurants and increase our ability to raise funds exponentially. We aspire to be an organisation with a national footprint and to be locally relevant. For this, we are actively seeking a headline sponsor and would welcome any corporate who wishes to partner with us. To date, StreetSmart has raised more than R9,6 million and we aim to extend this amount beyond R10 million this year, literally R5 at a time.

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