

Melanie Burke, founding member and new chairwoman of StreetSmart SA, reflects on how the non-profit organisation has used good food to make an impact over the past 10 years. Eugene Yiga chats to them

WHEN former banker and information technology specialist Melanie Burke moved to Cape Town, one of the first friendships she formed was with Margi Biggs, founder of StreetSmart.

"We were chatting one day about doing something together," Burke recalls. "She whipped out the StreetSmart table card she had brought back with her from the UK and asked whether I would like to become involved with this in South Africa. That was 10 years ago. And I am still thrilled to have been invited to help start StreetSmart SA!"

In the past decade, the public benefit and non-profit organisation has grown organically across Gauteng and the Western Cape. It is now active in nine centres, each of which has a committee of three to five volunteer members, and has a national board of volunteers. Similar StreetSmart organisations are run independently in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, the US, and the Netherlands.

But how does it work? The organisation raises funds by adding a R5 donation to each table's bill at participating restaurants. This donation is voluntary and diners may contribute more if they wish to. Every cent then goes towards social and educational projects that uplift street and other vulnerable children.

Burke says: "StreetSmart resonated with my professional philosophy to enable real impact and sustainability – not to throw money at the problem, but to ensure that real outcomes are achieved in the areas that matter most, such as education, skills development, family reunification, and societal integration."

For a project to benefit from StreetSmart SA funds, they need to be actively helping street children and children at risk by running programmes aligned with StreetSmart SA's aims.

The project should have been in existence for three or more years, be properly constituted, and be registered with the Department of Social Development. If an organisation can provide audited financial statements, and outline the impact of the project with a clear indication of outcomes and achievements, it will be considered for selection as a StreetSmart SA beneficiary in its city or town. The board then invites the organisation to provide a proposal in line with the funding available.

"Our impact has been in providing an additional income stream supporting and enabling our bene-



BACK TO THE FUTURE: Disadvantaged children who have benefited from the StreetSmart SA initiative with children from the Cape Town Multi-Service Programme.

A smarter way to give

fiary organisations with financial support to the value of more than R5 million," Burke says.

"StreetSmart SA financed about 19 programmes that directly and positively impact the lives of children. Some of these programmes involved job creation, and provision for social workers and auxiliary social workers, to assist the youth with life skills training and statutory interventions."

Last year, StreetSmart SA raised more than R1m through participating restaurants to benefit their respective communities. "We applaud our restaurant partners," Burke says. "They go beyond the call of duty and put their heart and soul into their efforts to help us raise funds for our beneficiaries."

One example of having an impact stands out for Burke. It involves a young boy who couldn't perform in a mainstream school environment and attended the Learn to Live Independent Skills School from January to December last year.

"At first he was considered an introverted, withdrawn child,"

Burke says. "(People) gave up on him as they saw him as different. He then joined a panel-beating workshop where he was coached in life skills training, reading, and writing. He soon came to be known as a hardworking, enthusiastic, and intelligent young man who didn't let life's challenges deter him from becoming a better person."

As he started to show leadership skills, he was nominated to become a prefect. He then went on to fulfil his duties to the best of his abilities, gaining respect from teachers and pupils alike. Now he is enrolled at the Best Centre in Woodstock, where he is continuing his education to fulfil his dream to become a mechanical engineer.

As StreetSmart SA celebrates a decade of making a difference, Burke is excited to be taking on the role of chairwoman.

In building a successful consulting business, she has worked across the private, public, and civil society sectors as a change practitioner, bringing her expertise in leadership development, collaboration, innovation, technology, and entre-



SHARED VISION: StreetSmart founders Margi Biggs and Melanie Burke

preneurship to the professional world.

"It is a real privilege to lead an incredible group of people into the next phase of our commitment to achieving the vision of StreetSmart SA," she says.

"I feel welcomed, supported, and energised by the board members of StreetSmart SA, by all the beneficiary organisations and members of the public, and our partner restaurants and sponsors who contribute to this shared vision."

Burke says the organisation's goals are multipronged: to be part of the process of social normalisation, to educate the public on responsible giving, and to partner organisations that can support their goals and goals of their beneficiaries. The biggest goal is to have a StreetSmart SA chapter in every city across South Africa so communities can help the vulnerable children on their streets in a responsible and sustainable way.

"The opportunity is always to sign up more restaurants to become StreetSmart and we are giving energy to this," Burke says.

"Of course, securing a corporate sponsor and partner is another endeavour we are committed to."

"This would give StreetSmart SA operational security and enable us to increase our marketing efforts to restaurateurs."

StreetSmart SA would welcome corporates wishing to partner it.

"We are interested in partnerships such as corporate social investment opportunities, employee volunteering, fund-raising initiatives, responsible giving campaigns, and payroll giving," Burke says.

She says there are many ways in which the public can support StreetSmart: they can help as volunteers with events, projects and fund-raising, but especially by encouraging restaurants to become StreetSmart.

For details or to make a donation, contact StreetSmart SA on 021 418 0621, e-mail info@streetsmartsa.org.za, www.streetsmartsa.org.za.