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# African Field Band Foundation

**by Retha Cilliers,**  
*national director of the Field Band Foundation as told to Allan Murray*

On a beautiful summer night in August 1974 at Ithaca, NY, the dream of an idea that was to become the Field Band Foundation was born. A gentleman named Johann Zietsman, an international music student from South Africa, and his wife were out for an evening stroll on campus when they stumbled across the DCI Championships.

What they saw and heard that night was amazing to both of them and Johann vowed to return to South Africa and one day duplicate the opportunity of music, marching and pageantry for all the children there.

In 1997, Zietsman found the PG Group, a corporation that wanted to make a "gift to the nation" in celebration of the 100th anniversary of doing business in South Africa. The PG Group donated five sets of instruments, five vehicles and the operational money for two years.

The initial five bands sported 600 underprivileged, township children in four provinces in what became known today as the Field Band Foundation. They were given the chance to spread love through music and the opportunity to rebuild communities where there was no after-school activity -- where oppression was life itself.

In 2003, there are now eight sets of instruments being shared by 17 bands in townships all over South Africa, with more than 2,400 children participating between the ages of seven and 21.

Most afternoons, dusty township streets and squares around the country reverberate with the strident sounds of brass bands (using American G bugles). Thousands of disadvantaged youngsters are celebrating their worth in the new South Africa.

The foundation gives young people in deprived township areas the opportunity to join a youth movement that teaches vital life skills through music and dance.

The field band movement is based on the international drum and bugle corps and show band models and uses music and dance for social development. A typical band has some 120 musicians and dancers. Most musicians play brass and percussion instruments; others perform on stationary instruments such as steel and African drums and marimbas.

South African townships have a century-old tradition of brass band playing and musicians are prime role models for young people. In their turn, field band members become role models and leaders, and the concept has been enthusiastically embraced by communities, businesses and both local and foreign governmental bodies.

Urban South Africa is a divided society and all South Africans do not share equal opportunities. In the suburbs, young people have access to a good education and a wide range of development activities. In the

townships, schools lack even basic amenities and after-school cultural and sporting activities are practically unknown.

This perpetuates the imbalances of the past and it is here that the Field Band Foundation plays a major role.

Music is a powerful magnet and young people flock to join the project. The field band movement is now five years old and growing at an extraordinary rate. Established regions have waiting lists of children eager to join and other regions clamor to climb on the bandwagon. The potential is limited only by funding constraints.

In the Western Cape, the foundation works in Cloeteville and Kayamandi, adjoining areas outside Stellenbosch. The Cloeteville community was created by forced removals from the town center in the 1960s.

Like other areas where the foundation is active, Stellenbosch has high unemployment and suffers from its attendant social challenges. Community support for the foundation is strong and it has a parents and a fund-raising committee.

The Stellenbosch band is now known as the BoE Cape Whalers. Links between Stellenbosch University and the Field Band Foundation have resulted in a training program for 10 students from the foundation.

Two new bands were started in Macassar and Lavender Hill in September 2002 with the sponsorship of Belron International, an international glass company. Gangsters and crime plague these areas and offering the children a positive alternative gives them the chance to build better lives for themselves. Membership there stands at well over 500.

The foundation works with 509 children in Bethelsdorp, Zwide, Sinyoka and Missionvale, just outside Port Elizabeth, and Mdantsane, outside East London. This area is known as the Eastern Cape. The work in this area is very successful and attracts children from all cultural groups, facilitating the development of good inter-community relationships.

The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund has made good the financial shortfall in this region, one of the poorest in South Africa. Unemployment is very high and the community values the jobs the foundation creates, as well as the opportunities it offers the children in the region.

In the Northern Cape, the foundation works in Galeshewe and Pescodia in Kimberley, an area well-supported by De Beers, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, Super Stone Mining, Eskom, the Northern Cape Department of Arts and Culture and the Francis Baard District Council.

This region offers a prime example of how successful the foundation can be with local support at its optimum. Development has been rapid, with the bands now performing at most local events and becoming the pride and joy of Kimberley and surrounding areas.

The children in turn develop a sense of belonging and purpose through the

**"Music is the universal language. There is nothing more powerful, more moving."**

*Joseph Tshabalala, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, patron of the Field Band Foundation*

(Top to bottom) Duduza Field Band, Gauteng East Province; Ronnie and Bertie Lubner and Lilian Sethusha, director of PGF Londulusha, the 2002 Field Band Foundation champion; BoE Cape Whalers, Cloeteville/Stellenbosch, Western Cape; NBS Meadowlands, Soweto, Gauteng Province; (inset) PG Bison Buccaneers, Durban, Kwazulu-Natal Province; PGF Londulusha Field Band, Springs, East Gauteng Province (photos from the collection of Allan Murray)

Foundation and acquire skills that they would otherwise never have known.

Super Stone Mining has funded an additional set of steel drums to be used by the Thusong Children's Shelter, whose children now perform with the De Beers Superstones. Some 450 children participate in the Northern Cape.

Areas covered in KwaZulu-Natal are Umlazi and Chesterville, outside Durban. Umlazi is a particularly difficult area for children since unemployment among parents runs more than 50 percent.

A close and mutually beneficial relationship with the Steel Drum Foundation has added real value for the children. Another benefit is the proximity of the Brian Thusi Music School with which the foundation has forged a close relationship. Many of the children study theory there.

The foundation also works with the KwaZulu-Natal Youth Wind Band and the DLI Brass Band. Approximately 320 youngsters are involved.

Another area where the foundation is active is Gauteng that includes Dobsonville and Meadowlands, both in Soweto, and Duduza, close to Springs. In collaboration with the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, the foundation is also working at the Sibonile School for the Visually Impaired.

This band is progressing and the children are dedicated and enjoy their new musical prowess enormously. Their first performance at the 2002 National Championships had the whole audience on its feet.

Since Gauteng is the most economically viable area in South Africa, these bands are in high demand for performances. This represents real progress toward long-term financial sustainability.

The professional demeanor and dedication of the children make them favorites at any event and the bands perform somewhere nearly every weekend. Despite Gauteng's economic standing, the unemployment rate of their parents is higher than in any other region (84 percent in Dobsonville).

With very few after-school activities available, the numbers taking part in field band activities have been consistently high at around 580.

The National Championships are the focus of every field band member. Each child auditions to qualify for the privilege of taking part, so this is the culmination of the year's work. The main purpose of the championships is to introduce a healthy competitive spirit that in the long term will raise the standard of the bands to enable them to perform at a high enough level to be self-sustaining from performance fees.

The 2002 championships were held at the Dobsonville Stadium in Soweto and were preceded by a 10-band march through the streets of Johannesburg, a sensational event for the children who reveled in the attention



PGF Londulusha Field Band, Springs, East Gauteng Province (Allan Murray).

and cheers they received from crowds.

The championships are designed to inspire creative expression in a controlled situation, underlining the foundation's focus on excellence, self-confidence and the

"Having had the privilege of hearing a field band perform, I can truly say I was impressed and touched by the dedication and vibrant energy of these talented young people. It is clear that participating in the field band has changed their lives for the better and it is my desire that many more field bands (be) created all over the country.

"I hope many more institutions will support this foundation to enable this concept to develop to its full potential. This is real 'RDP for the soul' at work!"

*Nelson Mandela in a letter to  
Field Band Foundation Chairman Bertie Lubner*

acquisition of skills. It has been heart-warming watching the progress of the children and their teachers.

The primary aims of the Field Band Foundation seek to foster these principles among its members: a

belief in the inherent worth of the individual and constructive participation in civil society; a commitment to self-determination for individuals and communities; an acknowledgement of the need for social cohesion; the pursuit of democratic values and practices and the rule of law as a means of ensuring a fair and just society; respect for diversity and gender equality; the development of capacity and willingness to resolve disputes peacefully; training HIV/AIDS peer educators in the fight against the AIDS pandemic ravaging Africa; softer issues such as team spirit, tolerance, reliability, responsibility and self-discipline.

The communities served are among the most challenged in South Africa. By networking with support organizations such as Childline, Drugwise, Child Welfare and Narcotics Anonymous, the Foundation aims to ensure that young people have access to professional help in dealing with the extraordinary problems they face.

The establishment of field bands creates jobs for teachers, drivers, costume-makers, instrument repairers and caterers. Above all, the children experience the joy of creative expression, a sense of pride and increased self-confidence, which is reflected in their schoolwork and general attitude.

South Africa has more HIV-infected people than any other country and about one-third of these are aged 13 to 24. These statistics closely correspond with the age group catered to by the foundation, which clearly has the opportunity and the duty to do what it can to combat the scourge.

The foundation is joining with a health organization with vast experience in the field of HIV education and prevention to develop the concept of music as a means of protecting children from infection. As a familiar and trusted partner in the communities it serves,

the foundation is uniquely positioned to play an effective role in this struggle.

The most important difference the foundation makes is to offer long-term commitments and possibilities. The foundation acts as a support system for young girls and teaches empowerment and their right to assert themselves. In addition, the young men who are members learn that violence against women is unacceptable.

Working together in the foundation toward a common goal fosters a culture of gender equality. With a fully encompassing program adjusted to the realities of life in the communities in which it operates, the foundation's HIV/AIDS program can save literally thousands of young, productive lives.

The Field Band Foundation was established as a Section 21 company (not-for-profit), with a major sponsorship by the PG Group. In 1998, the foundation, with PGSI as sponsors, won the Business Arts South Africa Award for Best Long Term Development Project. In 1999, again with PGSI, it won the BASA Award for increasing access to the arts.

The foundation is particularly proud of the personal endorsement by then-President Nelson Mandela and the ongoing support of the office of the president. In 1999, the foundation entered into a skills upliftment agreement with the Norwegian Band Federation. In the same year, the foundation initiated an annual exchange program with Drum Corps International, whose corps host selected South African children for the American summer season.

In 2002, the foundation was invited by the Norwegian Foreign Department to send a band to perform in Molde and Oslo for President Thabo Mbeki's official visit to Norway. This band also played in the Norwegian National Day parade in Oslo.

Also in 2002, the foundation received the Arts and Culture Trust Award for Best Practice Project and it has been contracted to provide entertainment at all 2003 Cricket World Cup matches countrywide.



*Allan Murray was a member of the Toronto Optimists before moving to California to play snare in the Anaheim Kingsmen. He studied music at the University of South Florida,*

*taught and/or arranged for such corps as the Oakland Crusaders, Seneca Optimists, Spirit of Atlanta, Suncoast Sound, Boston Crusaders, Pioneer, Magic of Orlando and the undefeated 1994 Empire Statesmen.*

*Internationally, Murray has arranged for and taught Starriders from Germany, La Fiesta from Japan and he has taught clinics in Canada, the United States, Japan, South Africa and Indonesia.*

*In 1998, he joined DEG Music Products, Inc. as Dynasty USA product line manager, responsible for sales, marketing, research and design of marching brass, bugles and percussion. In August 2002, he was promoted to vice president, sales and marketing, for Dynasty USA.*