



KIDS RULE THE AIRWAVES

Radio changes young lives in gang-ridden suburb

By JANINE STEPHEN

The addict stands before a knot of children on a Manenberg street, a smile on his scarred face. “You just think I’m full of trouble and...it’s not like that,” he says into a microphone held by the eldest boy, Brandon*. “All I can say is, use me as a mirror man. Maybe I am your mirror.”

The children he’s speaking to so seriously are also from Manenberg, a Cape Flats suburb long associated with grinding poverty and gang activity. Just in May tensions spiralled between rival groups. Nights were studded by gunfire; a toddler was wounded by a stray bullet; a 20-year-old died.

But Brandon, 14, and an assortment of other local youngsters — the smallest seven; the eldest a bright-eyed 16-year-old named Astrolita — have found a way of making some sense of their complex community. Armed with a recorder, a microphone and their own quick wits, they interview the people around them. They have become youth radio reporters, and the stories they uncover have changed the way they see the world.

Brandon had long been warily curious about his scarred neighbour, but the micro-

phone gave him courage to approach him. Expecting to find a hardened gangster who would chase them away, the children were taken aback when he agreed to an interview.

“He’s using drugs,” says Brandon. “But he says he loves his child very much. He said we mustn’t go to drugs or gangs. Afterwards he said well done for the interview, and that I can go far with this radio thing.”

Every week, the young reporters gather

recruits, and they’re briefing them on the house rules, like “keep cool at the pool and don’t be the fool” — code for leaving all attitudes outside. A child with fuzzy animal earmuffs is demonstrating how to plug mic to recorder. And there’s a briefing on the ethos printed on the kids’ media badges: “I promise to report accurately, ethically and honestly.”

“Accurately means I can’t interview you, and you say you like ice-cream and then I say you don’t,” a facilitator explains. The children suck in their breath in indignation. They also chew on the idea of confidentiality, and promise that discussions in the workshop won’t be gossiped about elsewhere.

Host of issues

This is important, because many of them live with a host of issues. Anna Versfeld, a social sciences masters student who has been working with the group, cites everything from alcoholism, unemployment, overcrowding and substance abuse in the yards they live in, if not in their immediate families, as problems.

Many residents have affiliations to gangs, shooting is rife and domestic and random

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— Rufka, 12

at the Druivevlei Community Centre for a workshop held by facilitators from the Children’s Radio Foundation (CRF). The centre is a somewhat grim-looking building in a neighbourhood of semi-detached homes and backyard dwellings — far from the toughest area in Manenberg, but still in a community beset with hardships.

The radio group has welcomed some new

A tool of enquiry: Keith, 12, questions the world around him



At 16, Astrolita is the eldest of the budding radio reporters



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violence is common. A reporter's father was stabbed to death under a month ago, and at least three of the children in the group saw the body in the street. Versfeld suspects at least one case of post-traumatic stress disorder among the children.

"The kids are very strong, but there are huge issues," agrees Clémence Petit-Perrot, CRF curriculum director. A tiny eight-year-old with long braids and a dab interviewing style made a public service announcement about not leaving firearms lying around after an incident in the community when a baby found and fired a gun.

But it's not all about issues. The first story Brandon ever recorded was about his brother's dog Bruno: its lovely wet nose and how he taught it to fetch sticks. "It's important to tell our own stories because people outside Manenberg don't know how it really is here," says Bronwyn, 15. "They think if you come here they will shoot you and it's all gangsters here. But it isn't like that."

So the children make inserts on positive things, too, like kind-hearted centre director Auntie Gwen Jacobs, who is something of a role model. They've interviewed capoeira players and B-boys. They are children at heart, and love the beach and boerwors rolls and soccer. In the future, they'll interview inspirational figures like musicians, as well as focus on the social issues. Like Audrey, 12, who wants to interview homeless people.

Transformative experience

But tackling the tough stuff has been transformative. The young reporters visited child welfare offices and the local police station. They quizzed an inspector on what the cops were doing about crime in Manenberg and why people join gangs. "He gave us a very inspiring story of why he wanted to become a policeman," Bronwyn, 12, recalls. "They played us the police siren — so loud! — and showed us the cells and how the prisoners wrote a lot of scary things on the cell gates there."

"The radio has become a tool of enquiry for the children," Petit-Perrot notes. "They have an active role to deal with reality, and they have found that they can go out and ask why things are happening. They get to hold adults accountable."

"It feels great to ask questions because you can get answers to everything you want to know," Danielle says with satisfaction.

The radio broadcasts have also altered relationships between parents and children. "Danielle can't stop talking about the programme," her mother Isabelle says. "She's a much stronger person now. She was a very shy child; now she can even talk in front of a crowd."

"Parents have become immensely proud because they realise their children have capacities they didn't realise they had," says Versfeld.

Rufka, 12, glows when asked about playing her insert to her family. "They said I was great and wonderful," she says. "Story-telling is important to know about one another and life. I'm different since the radio. I like to speak clearly and I feel great when I'm interviewing, special, like everyone is listening to me."

Inspiration also comes from unexpected quarters — like the interview with the drug-using neighbour. "Your mind is the biggest muscle in the body and that is the muscle that is seldom used," he told Brandon and his friends. "You need to train yourself to use your brain. The sky is the limit, you hear it in music guys. There's no limit to what you can be." **TBI**

* Children's names and/or surnames kept confidential to protect their privacy.



- Material produced by the CRF is broadcast on SAFM on Fridays and Saturdays at 12h00.

- CRF's other Cape Town projects include one at the Brooklyn Chest Hospital for children with TB, and one with Medecins sans Frontieres in Khayelitsha, focusing on HIV positive youth.

- Plans are for a national network in all provinces by the end of 2012.

Visit www.childrensradiofoundation.org for more information.