

## Report on Youth Conference

### Introduction

The fourth Biennial Youth Conference of the National Association of Child Care Workers was held in Bloemfontein under the theme, "Putting the children's act into action – together we can". 97 young people under the age of 18, who are vulnerable, orphaned or at risk, travelled from all over the country, including the most rural parts to critically engage with the Children's Act in a "meaning making process", under freezing temperatures. This representative group of young people included four young people with disabilities. It was the first time that most of these young people had heard about the Children's Act and engaged with this piece of legislation it made them feel very special to be participating at this level of conversation. The Youth Conference process had two parts with the first part being the Pre-Camp, and the second part being the Youth Conference itself. These young people described this time as "the life changing seven days of their lives", and indeed in that is exactly how it turned out to be.

### Process

#### Pre – Conference Camp

The youth gathered together in the evening of Friday and upon arrival at the Retief Kamp, they were greeted by very cold winds blowing from the nearby Masselpoort Dam. As we were allocating rooms one could clearly see the anxiety on their young faces. During that time, one young person said with a shivering voice "What have I got myself into?". And truly for us the child and youth care workers who accompanied these youths, the same question raided our minds. Our time together started off on a very bleak and blistering cold note with some of the young people not carrying a single blanket. Child and youth care workers had to work in the moment to ease the growing anxiety. Alternative arrangements were made with Ons Kinderhuis for extra blankets and these brought some relief. As we moved from one rondavel to the next, we were blown away by the generosity we saw as the young people combined their blankets and slept together to survive the night drawing from each other's body heat. Each rondavel had two child and youth care workers who shared with the young people.

The breakfast siren broke the silence on the Retief Kamp and one could see youth with their little fragile bodies huddled in blankets, slowly making their way through the dew covered grass, to the eating area. A bid to start a conversation with any of these young people would be met by an empty glare! But as the day unfolded, so did the adventure for these young people.

They were divided into groups of seven colour codes and engaged in activities that changed their personal beings. Rotating from one breakaway session to another, their fears,

creativity and leadership skills were challenged to the limit through activities like paintball, abseiling, v – rope, cross over and the amazing race. These activities were facilitated in such a way that they stimulated the thinking of the young people and drew out their hidden selves. The HIV/AIDS breakaway proved to be stimulating for the young people because it tested their knowledge on facts and myths surrounding the disease. Discussions were facilitated with young people regarding prevention and the use of condoms, and how to administer ARV medication. As these young people were sharing, one could clearly see that they had had close contact with people living with the HI virus. They demonstrated how to use both male and female condoms. Every group of young people that came to this breakaway started off shy, but the maturity and skill of the child and youth care workers who facilitated this session helped them to feel comfortable and to talk openly about the disease. It was refreshing to hear the language used by some of the young people and there was a spate of humour that went with some of the groups that lightened the sombreness of the topic, testimony to the sense of ease felt in these groups. Later in the afternoon, the young people's laughter and excitement echoed through the nearby mountains as the level of fun reached high peak.

Most of these young people had come to this Conference with heavy personal baggage. For example, 16 years old 'Jodie' has been raped four times by adults close to her after both her parents passed away. This girl now lives in a residential facility and has been dealing with her anger and grief through writing poetry that reflected her feelings. Today she is rolling on the grass, having fun with other young people and she finds comfort in knowing that she is not alone in this world; there are other young people on this camp with similar and even more challenging backgrounds. Already at this point, one could feel the caring environment that was created by the child and youth care workers. This environment allowed young people to be themselves without any fear of being rejected or put down. It also invited them to come out and play.

As evening fell the laughter slowly faded to give rise to drumming sounds that captivated the night. During the two hour drumming session the young people found healing through the carefully orchestrated sounds of their music. Every young person was involved in this activity from clapping hands, blowing vuvuzelas to beating sticks and drums. As the different sounds collaborated to create one rhythm, the young people celebrated the birth of this beautiful sound – created by their own hands. It was a moment to celebrate to see 'Piet' from Platfontein, one of the most withdrawn young people on the camp, beating the drum and becoming one with the sound as he closed his eyes and his body moved to the rhythm that he created. The music lifted these young people up to another level and the young people did not want to let go of the drums and we struggled to have them leave the hall for supper. They took the drumming with them and danced to the music all the way to supper. Their faces and dancing told a story of accomplishment, renewal and acceptance despite the hardship they had to endure in their lives. The healing created by the drumming session was so powerful that it could even be felt by the child and youth care workers. We were now

confident that the pre camp had met its objective of connecting the young people and building their self esteem!

On the last night of the camp, the young people were taken on a night walk. In the dark wilderness the young people had a solo session under the clear and beautifully starlit skies. The view of the stars was breathtaking as one could see them lined up perfectly in the Milky Way with the Southern Cross, Pointer Stars and the North Star parading to the young people who were just staring at the sky in disbelief. During the last day of camp we engaged the young people in an environmental awareness activity where we cleaned the camp site while having discussions with them on how to care for the environment and how we are one with nature. During this activity, some of the young people became anxious about leaving this place they had started off by hating due to the cold, and later learned to love. As we left the camp site the young people sang the camp anthem that had come out of the drumming session:

*Putting together the children's act,  
Putting together, together we can.  
HIV and AIDS we can beat it – take responsibility.  
I know I can, you can, and together we can.*

We waved goodbye to the camp facilitators with drums and vuvuzelas blazing. This was a job well done and yet, we knew that the bigger challenge for us as child and youth care workers was to hold the energy created at this camp through the rigorous sessions on policy matters that lay ahead at the youth conference!

## Youth Conference

The shift from the camp site to the school hostels was indeed a major transition. During lunch there was a buzz in the dining area. The young people were excited and curiously I moved amongst them in an attempt to understand their excitement. Then one of them passed by me and said to me in Afrikaans “now we are in a five star hotel”, pointing to his meal that was accompanied by dessert. I could not help but laugh and celebrate with them the change of environment and warmer weather!

Immediately after lunch the young people grouped into their different regions and started painting banners to parade at the opening of the main conference the following morning. They let their creativity flow to develop banners that represent their cultural identities and the theme of the conference. The floor of the school hall and the paving outside bore witness to the colourful and spectacular banners created.

With pride each group held their banner high in the sky as they paraded to enter the main conference. Drums and vuvuzelas were blazing as they sang their song. The main conference literally came to a stop as the young people made their entrance. The social service

professionals attending the 17<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the NACCW picked up on the energy of the young people joining in the singing and dancing.

We left the morning session of the conference with young people in complete awe and still captivated by the powerful message that was directed to them by the NACCW patron Dr Don Mattera. He spoke to them about their youth and the pitfalls they face in their journeys to becoming adults. He encouraged them to take charge of their lives and become the best they can be. In rounding off his speech to the youth, Dr Mattera narrated a poem about "This child". Listening to this poem each young person felt that it was speaking to them personally as they saw themselves as the child portrayed in the poem.

Lucy Jameson from the Children's Institute was the key facilitator of the Youth Conference. She held separate sessions with the child and youth care workers teaching them techniques for facilitating different Sections of the Act. The afternoon session saw the young people starting to engage with the Children's Act document under her skilful and thoroughly prepared guidance. Her presentation and approach to the Children's Act was child friendly and allowed young people to easily engage with the document. Whilst they were talking about the interconnectedness of family, community, government and the advocacy role of the law, Dr. Matera paid a visit and unobtrusively sat amongst them, as if to draw of their lively energy to him. With a smile on his face he opened up his arms to welcome them sit with him as they narrated their poetry. These were deeply private moments, almost magical, transcendent moments of life.

The young people were graced with a visit by the MEC for Social Services Mme Mantobela. She engaged in conversation with the youth on issues that affect their everyday lives like teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, drug and alcohol abuse and crime. In motivating them to live positive lives she read out a letter written to her by a young girl who passed away due to physical abuse by her father and AIDS. The letter described endless hours of abuse and suffering the girl went through and a plea to other youth. This session was also attended by Dr. Matera who chatted with the young people after the MEC departed connecting with them by telling of his own life experiences. It was at this stage that he asked for poetry from the young people and there were some moving poems showing how pain and hurt were dealt with. Capturing the poetic moment, drums started softly in the background giving support and rhythm to those narrating poems. The session unearthed hidden talents. The young people experienced themselves in a different way and this elevated their self worth. After the session I took some time to talk to a couple of the young people to get their opinion of the session. The fascinating part is that none of them were able to explain in words how they experienced the session. The responses I got ranged from, young people jumping up and down with hands shaking, to comments like, "Yo – yo – yo". The best way one girl could explain was, "It was like..., you know like.... I mean it..., I don't know what to say"!

With the gruelling program the young people endured, we found it appropriate for them to have some time off and for this, outings were arranged for them to go to the movies and the Loch Logan Waterfront. Given the disadvantaged backgrounds and rural areas they come from, it was the first time some experienced the cinema and mall. And for this, the young people were very grateful.

On the third day of the youth conference the young people started preparations for their plenary presentations at the main conference. As one was moving from group to the next, it was easy to note the intense level of discussion that the young people were engaged in. These young people had never viewed their existence as seriously as they did through this process. Driven by the will to be heard, they continued the preparations after supper and went into the late night hours. This was followed by a sleepless night for some of the child and youth care workers who worked through the night to put the young people's presentation onto PowerPoint.

As the morning session of the main conference proceeded, bringing closer and closer the time for young people to do their presentation, child and youth care workers were seen providing last minute support to the youth. Some were nervous and anxious while some were gripped by the excitement of the moment. Song and dance started outside to encourage the young people selected to do the presentation (See addendum 1 for full presentation).

The Social Service Professionals listened to the youth's presentation with tears of joy forming in the eyes of some. Child and youth care workers and Social Workers were challenged by the young people to work together and integrate their services to provide effective services to them. The young people reminded the professionals that they should be in the centre of services and that decisions taken should be in their best interests. After the presentation delegates engaged over tea and the buzz was all about the youth's presentation – the way it was structured, presented and what it meant for them.

## Conclusion

The connectedness that developed between the young people during this time was a marvel to watch. These young people came from all corners of the country and developed a bond that seemed there all the time. They left the conference with rejuvenated spirits and changed mindsets. One of the young people that I interviewed described this as an experience that she will hold very close to her heart. She said, 'I got over a lot of my fears during this time, and although I'm a white girl, none of the other young people made me feel uncomfortable. I will definitely share this experience with my children some day'. Another young girl had the following to say, "My highlight was the tyre activity. It reminded me of my past experiences and I got emotional doing it. What I liked about it was that it allowed me as a tall person to do an activity that tall people are good at". One of the young boys who come from a rural area expressed his delight at having been part of this process.

There was a feeling of pride and contentment they carried with them as they waved goodbye to each other after the conference, as if to say “Yes it is true. Together we can raise our voices and be heard”. The 4<sup>th</sup> Biennial Youth Conference of the National Association of Child Care Workers came to a conclusion leaving young people in a positive frame of mind and believing in themselves and their own abilities. It also left the child and youth care workers with renewed vigour and dedication to the work that lies ahead.