

Youth piping their way to a better future

HAVING spent some youthful years in a pipe band at CBC Pretoria, I could easily mistake the work of the non-profit Field Band Foundation (FBF) as being much the same thing – mainly music, with some added benefits.

Why, then, do top companies like De Beers, Anglo American, Investec, PPC Cement, and the PG Group, invest so consistently in the Foundation's 48 township marching bands of about 125 children per band? A nice-to-have?

Nope. The real story – one these companies embrace – is much more profound. It is that the FBF's structured performances in music-making give youngsters from backgrounds of social and economic devastation a set of critical life skills in discipline, time-keeping, competitiveness and teamwork. They imbue a self-belief that lets them know they matter, and that they have more choices than they imagine – over 40 000 of them over 20 years, with 6 500 in 2016.

It is specifically placed in some of our worst-off places, in bands working



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intensively four afternoons every week. These are areas where resignation, despondency, fatalism and worse seem to be the accepted order of life. After all, South Africa's full unemployment rate is 36%, but in these places it can be 80% or higher, and often people have had no work for a decade or more. With no dole; you lose your job, and that's it, assuming you ever had one. The SAIRR reports that about 60% of youngsters will not work a single formal job day in their 20s, and what chance after that? For where all economic activity ceases, so does sport, schooling success, behaviour, respect for self and admiration of elders.

These are, to put it mildly, "very hard places", as chief executive Nicky du Plessis reminded the Foundation at end-2015: "These are sometimes whole

communities where disappointment is an inter-generational mentor, where the soul tastes defeat in every form, and dies by inches. Gangsters become symbols of action. These places are where we will form up, raise South Africa's flag, and march. They are our reason. Winning the battle-of-the-role-model is our programme to liberation and widening horizons; a victory that comes in many parts."

That battle means emphasising ethics, insisting on discipline because young people are worth it, demanding excellence, teaching values-based life practices (which has helped destroy HIV's grip, down from 20% of Field Band members two decades back, to today's 0.1%). And some members get extra training in Norway and the US each year.

Field Band officers watch with eagle eyes for the children being beaten senseless or raped in homes given over to darkness; or who have little more than the shirt on their back; or are always without shoes; or – as happens – have begun starvation's descent.

That's when the FBF operation called "Children in Distress" kicks in – with targeted food-to-home shipments, psycho-social interventions, policing, clothing, counselling, household visits – individual missions that have had to triple in number these past 18 months.

Just last year that meant 825 special home interventions; 723 members individually cared for; and, emergency succour reaching them and their families: 2 892 people in all.

That underlines a January reminder to all operations: "Our young and our country are calling us, and we know we are equal to this. That is our duty."

It is why we should all sit up and notice a remarkable thing. Because we aren't witness here to the stereotypical crumpled-African-child-in-the-dust-covered-with-flies. Instead, we are witness to thousands of young South Africans, backed by top companies, parading across SA's Fields of Despair; utterly changing their and our reality.

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