

THEY CALLED HIM IRRESPONSIBLE BUT THIS MAN WILL INSPIRE YOU!



People told him he was irresponsible, but middle-class father-of-three George followed his instincts, went against his normal pattern of behaviour and made a giant impact on people's lives. 'Never underestimate the effect of even the smallest thing you can do,' he says

GEORGE AND CAROLYN SNYMAN and their three children were a typical white South African family. They lived a happy life in an affluent suburb of Pretoria, South Africa, that many would recognise. Then George heard a voice and nothing was ever the same again. He told SHIRLEY FAIRALL all about it

George (58) and Carolyn (57) live near White River, in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province. They have four children: Melody (31), Samantha (28), Joshua (26) and Nikiwe (17)

'WHEN I WAS IN MY LATE TWENTIES, I was running a marathon that set off from Hatfield Christian Church in Pretoria. Just before the race I popped in to use the loo. It was an enormous church and as I entered I saw a sign with the name Jesus on it. Suddenly I heard a clear audible voice that said, *I am alive*. I was alone in the church. That's the moment when everything in my life began to change. I wasn't looking for Jesus. I was a nominal Christian, very happy with my life, married to Carolyn and building a family. The encounter was totally unexpected.

I went to church that Sunday night and sat quietly in the back. When the worship music started I found myself weeping as if I were standing at an open grave. The same thing happened the following Sunday. On the third Sunday I found myself rushing to the front of the church and there was an enormous guy, six foot eight, waiting for me. He said simply, '*Welcome home*'.

'I wasn't one to make a show of myself'

This was all very unusual behaviour for me. I was a software programmer working for a bank, a behind-the-scenes kind of guy and absolutely not one to make a show of myself. Carolyn was a financial advisor. Now people were phoning her to ask what had happened to me. But I was desperate to soak up Christ and pretty soon Carolyn began to feel it too.



'I started seeing the poverty around me,' says George

I started seeing the world with new eyes, noticing the poverty and suffering around me. I met a pastor called Hezekiah in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, and I'd visit the townships with him, then come home to my comfortable life. It just didn't make sense.

At that time in South Africa, the Africa School of Missions just outside White River offered missions, development and nursing combined. We decided to move there, selling our house to pay for my studies in theology and development. We would live in the school and Carolyn would become the resident nurse.

irresponsible

But before we left we had to deal with how people reacted to what we were doing. We had three children under seven and ironically, some Christian friends said that I was being irresponsible and our children would pay the price. By contrast, the day I left my job at the bank my colleagues gave me a standing ovation as I walked out. They were applauding because I was going to chase my dream.



The structures George has set up over the past 30 years now feed around 10 000 children a day. 'Humanity's biggest challenge is the way we think,' he says. 'If you impact just one person, amazing things can come out of it'

We had a Honda Ballade and all we were taking to White River was what we could fit in it. We invited church members we had met through Hezekiah to come and take whatever they wanted of ours. This was 1989 in Centurion, Pretoria, a very conservative suburb. I think our neighbours were happy to wave us goodbye!

During my final year of studies I decided to face my biggest fear: rural Africa. I decided to walk through some of it, starting with the Democratic Republic of Congo and then walking down south. I was mindful of Jesus's teaching to look after orphans and widows but first I wanted to find God. And in one broken African village after another, I found Him.

'we did not know it was AIDS'

My last walk ended in a village populated by old women and orphaned children. The women prayed that God would use me throughout Africa. This turned out to be prophetic but I had no idea what was in store for us at that stage, nor did I have any ambition to be a leader. I didn't know what I was doing, or what I could do. I hiked home sick, exhausted, disillusioned and angry with God because I felt so helpless.



Volunteer care workers in Kitabataba in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Hands at Work model is to mobilise volunteers from local communities to care for orphans and widows

Not long after that we moved to Kwa-Zulu Natal. Carolyn and I went into the nearest village and just dealt with what we saw in front of us, not knowing that it was the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This was at the time that the government was denying the existence of AIDS so nothing was being done about it.

There were so many orphans scavenging for food on rubbish dumps. Sometimes they hadn't eaten for days and all we could offer them was half a loaf of bread. Every now and then we'd get a donation. Once someone gave us R1000 to buy food and I just burst into tears. We fed a lot of people with that money. We would also procure medicine secretly, antibiotics and painkillers mostly, but at least we had some relief to offer.

'Tell people we are dying'

Occasionally churches asked me to address their congregations and I did because a village woman had said, 'Tell people we are dying.' Every time I stood at the front of a church and said this, there was no response. I felt so defeated when I realised that no one was going to help but that was a pivotal moment because that's when I said to Carolyn, 'Let's just do it ourselves'.

We were mentored by a wonderful Zulu woman called Gloria who taught us the real meaning of service. We realised that it was our job, as Christians, to care for widows and orphans. We returned to White River and registered Hands at Work.



George and Carolyn with his mother Anna and their adopted daughter Nikiwe. 'All our children have taught us grace,' he says

Today we work in 63 communities in eight African countries (South Africa, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique and Swaziland). In every community we mobilise the locals to care for the widows and orphans: we have 800 care workers, members of the community who serve as an act of love. We help them with income-generating activities and planting food gardens.

life-changing act of love

In every community we also have what we call a Life Centre. It's a care point, offering food and support for children and grandmothers and a meeting place for the local youth. But the backbone of our ministry is what we call Holy Home Visits. When a child comes to a Life Centre, we follow up with a visit to their home. This is an act of love that closes the distance between us. It's life-changing. We know everyone in our communities by name. We make it personal. We say, *I know you and you matter.*

I heard about a boy with malaria and I went and got him and carried him to a care point. He was starving and downed three plates of food. Afterwards, when he talked about it, he didn't talk about the food. What was more meaningful for him was that I went and fetched him and carried him to help.



Nigerian field co-ordinator Taiwo. Hands at Work has changed his heart, he says. 'I have become passionate about serving the children. Serving is what God has called us to do. I've learned the importance of giving what I have to the people around me.'

We have 120 full-time workers, a mix of African and international volunteers. Hands at Work is African, it belongs here, so our international contingent takes a background role although they are people playing a huge role in our mission. They're our scaffolding. We put them up, stand on them to do what we have to do, then disassemble them and send them on to another place. We have offices in England, Canada, North America, Australia and Germany. We don't fund them; they are all staffed by volunteers who facilitate our volunteer workers, handle communication, finance and project management, and raise funds for us. Every cent they raise must come to Africa.

radically different

It's a radically different model. We teach our people to serve as Carolyn and I do. We put ourselves in the same boat as those we serve. We all experience servanthood and feel the pain of those we are serving. This is our privilege. Jesus came as a servant. Today everyone wants titles and to be first and best. Servitude is a lost art. We're rediscovering it and teaching it to others.

A huge part of our calling is not just to reach the children, but to level the cultural playing field, to respect and appreciate each other. We have 13 or 14 different nationalities in the community in which we live and we mix it up to be as diverse as possible.

smelly fish

We recently put a Canadian couple into a shared house with a Zambian couple and that mix gave us many laughs. The Canadians, used to having granola and orange juice for breakfast, would regularly come flying out of the house early in the morning because the Zambians were frying a particularly smelly fish for breakfast. But we all eat together very often with everyone bringing their contribution.



An international volunteer in South Africa. All volunteers learn the names of every person they come into contact with. 'We say, *I know you and you matter*,' says George

There are so many joys. Philippe was a young Mozambican boy. Two years ago when his village was hit by rebel forces and he was shot at, he was so traumatised that he ran into the bushes and it took us months to find him. Now he's happy at school and he mentors younger boys. I can tell you a story of a child like this from every community.

never underestimate what you can do

Humanity's biggest challenge is the way we think. We're too worldly and we forget that the smallest things can have the biggest impact. I believe it's called the butterfly effect. Yesterday I received a message from a man in his late 20s. He was 18 when he heard me speak about how we need to take care of those in need. He wrote to tell me that this changed his life. Never underestimate even the smallest thing you can do. If you make an impact on just one person, amazing things can come out of that.

We've never chased numbers but we know that on any given day, thanks to Hands at Work, about 10 000 children will eat or be visited at home and those who need it will receive medicine. If we give a community a sum of money for 50 children, we learn that they stretched it to care for 85-90 children. Our dream is to care for 100 000 orphaned children. We have always actively sought to be overwhelmed so we chose a number that seems unachievable in the face of the 180 000 new orphans every month in sub-Saharan Africa.



Left: The Hands at Work Life Centre in Mngwere, Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the world. Hands at Work reaches into 63 communities in eight African countries. Right: a girl befriended by Hands at Work in Zambia

If anyone has received anything, it's me. I had a massive struggle in the beginning. I was the wrong person for this in every way: white, Afrikaans, male. I tried to hand the leadership over but I believe I was blocked by God Himself at every turn. I thought I was the most unqualified person for this job but God can use everyone. I have discovered His grace, and in a very real way too through our adopted daughter, whose name is Nikiwe Grace.

our children taught us grace

All our children have taught us grace. We left a lovely house in Pretoria – they all had their own bedrooms and we had a swimming pool – and we lived for many years after that in smaller houses and with much less than we'd been used to. Yet all their happiest childhood memories come from the time after we left Pretoria. They talk very fondly of the tiniest house we lived in, so simple it didn't even have cupboards.

When we were leaving KwaZulu-Natal to return to White River, our eldest child Melody had the most to lose. She was in grade 7, head girl of her primary school and had a bursary for high school. She told us that when she thought about leaving she saw a mind picture of Moses being told to pick up his staff and go, so she was willing to go.

I love life

Like me, Melody is a runner, and after she finished grade 12 we were out running together and she said that she considered she'd had the most privileged life because she'd seen it from both sides. She said, '*I will not be shaken*'. And she wasn't: she's about to graduate as a doctor. Joshua has also graduated from university and Samantha is studying further now after having her family. I'm sure Nikiwe will go to university too. Every one of our children is amazing.

I love life. Every day is an adventure. I can't imagine a life outside of this. I can't imagine ever being safe and secure and comfortable.'



George and Carolyn with their children and eight grandchildren. Adults from left to right: son Joshua with wife Hanne, son-in-law-Chris and daughter Melody, daughter Samantha (husband Ashad not in photo) and George and Carolyn. Daughter Nikiwe is in pink. Melody recently commented to her father that she considers living without many material assets to have been a privilege

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