

RECENT THOUGHTS ON UTHANDO PROJECT from Uthando Director,  
DR JULIE STONE  
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For children to reach their full potential, respectful and loving relationships are an essential part of day to day life. Uthando exists to help facilitate such relationships for children living in all parts of the world. I believe Uthando enjoys the vitality and success it does because our intention is for respectful and loving relationships to provide the warp and weft of everything we do. At all levels of our grass roots organisation, relationships are what matter most.

Working in partnership with Rob Smetherham Bereavement Service for Children – Robs – has given our Australian-based project an invaluable opportunity to strengthen our vision, sense of value and contribution. This partnership has allowed Uthando participants to identify with and to support Rob's mission: "To bring hope and healing to bereaved children, their care-givers, families and other caring community members through therapeutic play interventions in communities affected by death and loss."

The Uthando Project draws together a diverse group of volunteers who by working with Robs get to learn more about, and to make a contribution to, Kwa Zulu Natal's children, families and communities. Rachel Rosenthal-Thresher and her team have been our teachers and our guides. Our relationship with them and the work they do is our "insurance policy" that Uthando's contribution is not only heart warming but that it also helps facilitate children's healthy social and emotional development.

Uthando is delighted that Robs has incorporated doll making as one of the tools they use in their community work. The Australian women, who, at their own expense, travelled to KZN in 2008 to co-facilitate a series of play for communication and doll making workshops, all say the experience has deepened their understanding and enriched their life. Rachel and Sibongile's recent visit to Western Australia offered an opportunity for many more of the Uthando family to get to know these remarkable women and the work they do. For me their visit was a precious time to delight in sharing with them and to deepen my personal and professional relationships with them.

As Uthando's Director and an infant, child and family psychiatrist, I am inspired by the way the Robs team has distilled all the knowledge and theory about children's developmental needs to their essence, and by the clarity and integrity with which they share their complex understanding with others. Rob's work has an elegant simplicity and their understanding is a rare gift so willingly shared with others.

In the wake of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, the challenges facing children and families living in southern Africa are unprecedented in world history. The purity of Rob's intention and the passion of the teams' commitment continue to inspire Uthando's work. Robs day to day work midst the suffering and need of courageous yet over-burdened families and communities, inspires all involved with Uthando to remain connected to our responsibilities as members of the human. Rob's work and the hand of friendship and partnership they extend to us, enables us to keep our eyes open and helps us face the reality of the hardships. They also enable us to make a small contribution toward alleviating suffering and to, hopefully, enriching the future possibilities for our world's children.

Sadly, no society is without children who are hurt and confused by the experiences that they and their families find themselves in. Children's hurt and suffering is painful to think about. All too often it is brushed aside and dismissed in the hope that children "will not remember" or that "they are very resilient." I am very appreciate that the recent Fremantle and Midland workshops, organised by Georgia and her phenomenal team of shining people, created a space where some of the "difficult truths" of children's experience could be thought about and talked about.

The reflective conversations and the relationships forged during the creative workshops have the potential to become a powerful healing force within our society. Perhaps it was no surprise for anyone attending the workshop to share with our sisters from KZN and to recognise that our hopes and fears and dreams for our children are the same. This connection reminds us again that we must work together to care for the world's children. There is much to do here in Australia. Every conversation which widens our heart and brings a deeper appreciation, understanding or renewed commitment to engaging with children to create loving and respectful relationships with them, is one way to together build a world fit for our children and our children's children.

Julie Stone