

Ensuring quality access to ECD

Jamey Gordon

A selfless community activist who, above all else, makes sacrifices for the benefit of others has been honoured in a truly special way.

Léanne Keet, founder of the community organisation Masikhule, was recognised as a Paul Harris Fellow by the Helderberg Sunrise Rotary Club (HSRC) during its presidential induction ceremony hosted at NH The Lord Charles on Tuesday 12 June.

"I feel honoured to have received this recognition which means so much to me and the incredible Masikhule team," said a proud Keet. "Although the recognition was granted to me, I believe nothing can be achieved without the support, hard work and shared vision of the entire Masikhule team. My gratitude also goes to HSRC for my nomination."

The local Rotary club supporting the organisation which trains women from marginalised Helderberg communities in Early Childhood Development (ECD), awarded Keet the recognition for embodying the humanitarian spirit conveyed through Rotary's motto, "Service Above Self".

As described by Rotary, when a person is recognised as a Paul Harris Fellow, they are presented with a certificate and a lapel pin and medallion. HSRC has made a contribution of US\$1 000 towards The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International in Keet's name.

Newly inducted president of HSRC, Julie Kydd, described Keet as a "deserving" recipient of the award.

"She and her small team of women work hard and play an important role in the first 2 000 days of a child's life, starting with training offered to expecting mothers," said Kydd.

She expressed her enthusiasm and excitement for the Rotary year, which she expects to be challenging following the sudden passing of their president-elect Jeremy Glover earlier this year.

He died in an accident during the 2018 Cape Town Cycle Tour ("Dedicated Rotarian Remembered", *DistrictMail*, 19 March). Due to the tragic loss, Kydd stepped up to the plate.

"I look forward to the year ahead, bringing the fun back and exposing Rotary to the public," she added.

HSRC has supported Masikhule in its mission to ensure that all underprivileged children living in disadvantaged communities are cared for at ECD centres offering holistic development and stimulation programmes, so little ones have access to formal schooling with a solid foundation of knowledge, maturity and independence. The Rotary club also facilitated a sizeable international grant to the organisation last year.

Masikhule was founded in 2005 by Keet, who worked on her own for three years before welcoming volunteers on board. The organisation was registered as an NPO and PBO in August 2006.

Masikhule, meaning "we are growing", boasts seven employees serving ECD centres in Somerset West, Sir Lowry's Pass, Strand, Lwandle, Nomzamo, Asanda Village, Firgrove, Macassar, Eerste River, Raithby and other areas in the Winelands.

"As with most NPOs, the need for sustainable and reliable funding remains a constant challenge," Keet explains.

In the Helderberg there are also a vast number of organisations, all needing funding, and the challenge is for the greater community to continue supporting them.

"The areas we work in face huge challenges daily, owing to poverty,

unemployment, poor living and working conditions and lack of resources," says Keet. "These challenges they face, however, are what motivate us to work even harder to ensure that women and children in these communities feel empowered, inspired and become independent."

Masikhule trains more than 300 teachers in ECD annually; mentors up to 30 community-based ECD centres, each over a period of three to five years until registered with the Department of Social Development and confidently independent. It ensures more than 1 800 children from birth to six years are educated and nurtured in these preschools and crèches, providing sound early development and the best start.

According to Keet, more than 1 600 young children from age six months receive a daily nutritious meal through Masikhule's partnership with JAM-SA and the Lunch Box Fund. Furthermore, a Teachers' Early Learning Resource Library has been established to ensure the ECD centres have access to a variety of teaching materials and resources (including computers, printers and internet access), educational toys, games and books for stimulating learning.

She says: "We are very mindful about



Pictured (from left), Julie Kydd (newly inducted HSRC president), Léanne Keet (Masikhule founder), Linda Merand (past HSRC president), Casper Kruger (outgoing HSRC president and incoming district governor).

remaining a needs-based organisation and, through regular collaboration and communication, constant monitoring and evaluating, we adapt what we do to ensure we remain relevant, accessible and practical. To save overhead and administrative costs, we do not have a central office, we drive our own vehicles and use our own resources, so any funding that comes in is guaranteed to reach its intended beneficiaries.

"Last year, we received a generous sponsorship from Rotary International through their global grant and we are hoping that this recognition will allow us to reapply for funding from Rotary International in the future."

Locals have the opportunity to assist in fundraising and helping needy little ones fight off the winter chill, by clicking their needles and participating in the organisation's annual Cast On 4 Kids initiative on Mandela Day (Wednesday 18 July). The initiative will be hosted at the Erinvale Estate Hotel from 11:00 to 14:00.

Keen participants are required to dedicate 67 minutes to knitting beanies and mittens for children, from newborns to six-year-olds. The knitted woollens will be distributed to the 30 Masikhule-mentored early learning centres. For those not so keen on knitting, feel free to contribute with welcome donations; squares, blankets, scarves and storybooks (English, Afrikaans or IsiXhosa) will also be collected.

So get the ball rolling! For more details, visit www.masikhule.org. Alternatively, send an email to info@masikhule.org.