



A helping hoof

Amado is not your average child-rehabilitation centre. A smallholding nestled in Paarl Hoogte with a heart-achingly stunning view across the valley, the Amado Animal Assisted Therapy Riding Centre gives children with severe disabilities the opportunity to grow – physically, mentally and emotionally – through interaction with horses.

THE VIVACIOUS M'LANI BASSON started Amado in 2008. 'Basically, I was standing in a queue in Stellenbosch applying to be an exchange student,' explains M'Lani, 'and in front of me were two German women talking about an animal-assisted therapy programme in Germany that used horses. And I thought, wow, I can do this, I've been riding since I was three-years-old, I've got the horses and the facilities. So I hopped in my car, went to Flight Centre and bought my ticket. Two weeks later I flew to Europe and then got a job on an estate through the *Yellow Pages*, looked after 150 horses for a year and a half, then went backpacking around South America, and when I came back I built the stables and started the organisation. We officially became a non-profit organisation in 2008.'

The centre's five equine therapists – Josef, Rain, Fire, Grace and Amado – are well cared for, with shiny coats and rippling muscles beneath. The stables look cosy and seem to be in the midst of a gradual interior makeover. 'The children started painting the insides for the horses,' says M'Lani, 'it was their idea. They said they had pictures on their walls, so why shouldn't the horses?' →



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Horsing around

We walk down towards the ring and three of the horses saunter over casually and into our path – blocking the way as they nod their heads and flick their tails and stamp their hooves. 'They're just like big dogs, really,' says M'Lani, 'they love attention. There are also terrible flies this at this time of year, so what they really want is to be sprayed.' Thankfully, Reeve obliges, showering the quintet from the hosepipe. They jostle among each other to stand in the path of the gushing torrent, shaking their heads and occasionally bearing their teeth as if to shower their gums. 'It's amazing,' says M'Lani, 'Grace used to be terrified of water; she couldn't stand being washed or anything. But now look at her, she's actually coming forward to get wet. It just shows you that this whole environment is just conducive to growing and relaxing, and coming into one's own, at the age of 27, which is ancient for her.'

The horses come from a variety of backgrounds. 'Josef, the old one, I found in a field five years ago and rescued him. He was basically abandoned because he's old, but he's taught more than 1 000 children how to ride. He's given so much to all these kids. Now he's retired, but the kids still learn how



to lead and groom with him. Grace comes from Heroldsbaai, where they had those terrible droughts and were having to put down horses. Her owners phoned me and asked if I could take her. Rain and Fire I've had since they were 18 months old, and Amado was born here – I trained all of them.'

I gaze into one of Josef's great dark eyes. 'He's such a softie,' says M'Lani. 'He's bordering on pathetic.' I laugh nervously, unable to see anything pathetic about this great and imposing animal. 'He's very in tune with feelings. I use him with my traumatised children because he's not in your face; he waits for you to come to him, not like my friend here who will just come and bombard you with love.'

Next to the ring, two kids play with a beanbag, just tossing it back and forth. M'Lani points to a bow-legged boy on the right. 'That's Franklin. He has cerebral palsy and used to be in a wheelchair. Doctors said he had no chance to walk, but look at him now.' It's almost unbelievable. Franklin is a victim of foetal-alcohol syndrome too, resulting in a severe mental handicap, but here he is playing and laughing and about to ride →

on the back of a 400kg animal. I watch as M'Lani helps the boy onto the back of the horse. He is ecstatic, laughing raucously. M'Lani tries to let him do as much of the lifting as possible. 'I don't want to build glass cages around them. Birds with broken wings haven't learned to fly. That's the thing here – I try to give them as much independence as possible because I believe that is the only way to survive in this world. No one's going to be able to do everything for them forever.'

School ties

For practical reasons, M'Lani has a 200-child waiting list for the programme. 'I work with Ligstraal, in Paarl East,' she explains. 'It caters for children who can't go to mainstream schools. A good example would be a 14-year-old boy who's never been allowed to go to school, and who's now realised that he wants to. Where does he go? There are loads of kids like this in our country who've never been given the opportunity

'And all of the kids are brought back in the final two years of school so we can try to find them work, and also to find out what they want to do – what their interests are. The girls go to work in salons and tearooms, and the boys all want to be firemen or policemen. So what we'll do is contact the firehouse and try get them in there doing something – even if it's just cleaning the canteen – that gives them importance.

'I'm a realist, so I try never to have more than three to five school leavers out of the 40 to 60 children who are in the programme, because I can only find employment for that many. I'd rather be a quality than a quantity service. I can tell you what every one of these kids had for breakfast. I know exactly what they got up to on the weekend. I can tell you how far they are from using drugs for the first time. I know if they're on the limit of going into a gang or not. These kids are such easy targets. They're prepared to do anything, be with anyone, as long as those people are willing to be their friends. Girls will go into

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to get an education, but who suddenly realise that they do want to learn to read and write.'

Ligstraal caters for physically, mentally and socially disabled children. 'We introduced the programme with Ligstraal five years ago,' says M'Lani. 'Administratively, it's easier to deal with one school. I work with the occupational therapist at the school to identify the children's needs. I'm a registered trauma counsellor, so that's my educational background. We take the worst of the worst-case scenarios – I'd say 75% of my children have been thrown away by one or both biological parents.

'Remember when you were at school, those kids who used to sit alone in the library all the time? I take them. And when I get these kids to the stage when they want to go and play outside with their friends, I put them back into the system. That doesn't mean that I've abandoned them. I'm at the school four times a day – I pick the kids up in the morning, drop them back at lunch, fetch the second load and then return them at the end of the day. I speak to the teachers and they tell me immediately when someone has regressed. I try not to overstretch myself, but I try to incorporate as many kids as possible who need the therapy.'

The working world

Apparently, the kids reintegrate well into the programme each time they return. 'It's almost like a reward,' says M'Lani.

prostitution, no problem. These are the kinds of signs we look for and the kinds of things we try to stop. The fact that Petrus, who is 16, needs to come to me four days a week or he's going to end up in a gang is indicative of how bad things are out there.'

The prospect of the challenges that these children face at home is daunting. 'It's sad, because you can only do so much when you're here. But that's also how I cope with my work. I don't think about what goes on with these kids outside the farm. I wouldn't be able to survive if I did! My job is to give these children smiles for two hours a week. I bring them here and give them the best damn time of their lives, so that they've got something to get them through to the next week.'

M'Lani follows up with school leavers, too. 'They're all still employed. One is running a school library in Wellington, and there are quite a few carers and domestic workers, and guys working at fuel stations. These are things they can do, because they're working in groups; they don't have to take full responsibility. Even if it's just something simple, they're willing to go to work because it gives them pride.'

Equine economics

'Funnily enough, the beauty of our setting is part of the problem with getting funding,' says M'Lani of her efforts to raise funds. 'Those places that look like hell tend to have an easier time

procuring financial support. People want to paint a wall or build a classroom because that's immediate and tangible. It's different putting petrol in a car to get these kids to and from school, or providing horse food for a week.'

Amado relies entirely on donations, as the children's parents do not contribute anything at all. Fundraising events are difficult for the centre to organise. 'We only employ two staff members, because staffing eats into our funds and makes the programme more expensive,' says M'Lani. 'It costs R275 000 a year to run the programme, which is very cost-effective. The horses alone cost R80 000. That's why it's important to get companies involved, because if they can sponsor the project for a year, then we can spend more time with the kids and less time focusing on raising funds.'

A family affair

M'Lani keeps costs down by doing pretty much everything herself – with a little help from the family. 'My dad is busy down there right now hanging up flypaper. We don't get

electricians in to fix things; he does it. I learned how to lay bricks and we built the stables ourselves. I come from a privileged family but I acknowledge it, and that's why I'm doing what I'm doing – that's why I want to give back. I want children to be able to grow up how I grew up, where I grew up. I think it's fantastic for my parents to hear Franklin laughing like he's peed his pants because he's having so much fun. That was me 30 years ago, and now they get to hear it again. It's so nice to open our gates and have these kids come and just be ... kids.'

After spending a couple of hours in the company of this extraordinary woman, it's clear that her passion for helping these kids is in no danger of running out. 'I'm driven and impulsive, so I wanted a job that allowed me to, say, have a chat with you if I wanted to. People always focus on the giving side of it, but I'm actually very selfish because I love what I do. I'm doing this because I love it.'

For more info or to donate, check out www.amado.co.za.

