

Uthando Project: A Brief History 2004-2010

Beginnings and Early History



2004: Dr Julie Stone, an Australian infant, child and family psychiatrist, returned from South Africa determined to find a group of volunteers to make dolls for the children of the Hlabisa district, where she had visited the hospital. The Project has grown from this initial invitation to dollmakers.

(Market at Mtubatuba)

Tamsen Rochat, who began her clinical work as a psychologist at Hlabisa Hospital, led the project in KwaZulu Natal (KZN). After Antoinette Cely in the USA shared her sewn doll pattern and wrote about the project in her website newsletter to dollmakers, dolls came to Hlabisa from all over the world. They were distributed through clinics, hospitals and community groups.



On her second visit to KZN, Julie took 500 dolls from Perth, where a knitting and sewing shop, Calico and Ivy, inspired people's creativity by providing two specially designed knitting patterns and acting as a collection point with a joyful display of dolls in their shop window.

Supporters realised that this small project held huge potential, both for the children of KwaZulu-Natal, and in the resulting raised awareness of the dollmakers. Making dolls led people to develop real insights into the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on whole communities and the implications for the current generation of children.

2005: Throughout the year, momentum increased, in Perth especially, through regular dollmaking days, doll garden parties, local media articles and an ABC TV programme illustrating the power of the project in a primary school.

(Tamsen Rochat receiving a box of dolls)



Dolls arrived from groups in Albany, Geraldton, Toodyay and Bunbury. Agnes Johnson reported from White Plains, New York of the enthusiasm there and that the dolls were being sent directly to Mtubatuba in KZN.

By September 2005, Genge Hlabisa, our Zulu community volunteer, had distributed 2520 dolls in the Hlabisa district.

2006 saw a huge leap in production to over 6000 dolls sent from Australia, hundreds from other countries and the spread of the project from Perth to Melbourne, Victoria.



Over 100 requests for patterns resulted from an ABC radio interview with Dr Julie Stone, now living in Melbourne. Her international work inspired friends in London, Paris and USA to activate community groups. Over 20 schools participated in WA, with 15 community centres and hundreds of individuals.

The invitation to make dolls was extended in many ways. In Western Australia, there was a Uthando Project stall at the Festival of Perth's screening of "Yesterday" (a film which explored the life of an HIV+ Zulu woman, and her love for her child, Beauty). Doll kits were distributed at a market and an environmental fair. Uthando Project speakers invited dollmakers to get their needles busy at Seniors' Centres, Social Groups, Rotary Clubs, many schools and community centres. The Soroptimists on the Terrace generously donated the income from the gallery Opening Night for the Western Dollmakers Exhibition.

A regular dollmaking session was set up in Leederville and several workshops were held in Fremantle at Glyde-In Community Centre and The Meeting Place. Our main centre was in Gooseberry Hill, at the home of artist Georgia Efford, the Uthando Project Coordinator. An Echo newspaper article with the photo to the right brought a huge response from dollmakers.



Agnes Johnson in New York arranged for hundreds of dolls to be sent. Dolls came from UK and Europe, posted to the Post Office in Mtubatuba. Two shipments from WA, of 1300 and 1800 dolls, were sent by sea.

In April 2006, Julie Stone and Georgia Efford travelled to Pietermaritzburg to participate in CINDI's 10th Anniversary Conference. The conference reflected on lessons learned after 10 years of striving to improve the lives of children living midst the HIV/AIDS

pandemic. Many partnerships and plans were initiated during that visit. These were consolidated when Dr Stone visited again in October, with Irene Gill and Clare Harris.

It became clearer to us, how deep and wide and exhausting was the work of hundreds of courageous volunteer organisations and government departments committed to combating the profound effects of HIV/AIDS, poverty and malnutrition upon children and families in South Africa. All indications are that the pandemic has not yet reached its peak, with 2 million women in Southern Africa, mostly mothers, being HIV positive. (In KZN, that includes 40% of women attending ante natal clinics.)

Uthando Project made a commitment to support organisations already showing experienced commitment to the holistic health of children and their carers.

More 2006: This was a huge year for the project, with our inaugural doll auction on Mother's Day in May. This major fundraising event now enabled us to work in partnership with community networks in KwaZulu-Natal. The intention was to support the psycho-social cluster members of the CINDI (Children in Distress) Network, in programmes focussed on fostering a deeper awareness of play.



In October 2006, partnerships were established with TREE (Training and Resources in Early Education), who operate from Durban, with centres throughout KZN; the Rob Smetherham Bereavement Services for Children in Pietermaritzburg, who worked with training in grief therapy; and the Sizabantwana group of schools, linked with the Psychology Department of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Setting up relationships with organisations that adhere to the CINDI principles of transparency, collaboration and sharing ensured that the dolls would find their right homes and that the funds would be applied wisely.

Media coverage has also helped the project, with many articles in local and national media. These articles speak on behalf of the Zulu children and often introduce us to new dollmakers. In New York, Agnes Johnson generated great action and awareness of the project and its intentions with a wider range of schools, churches, art centres and other groups.

After presenting a poster about Uthando's work to the World Association of Infant Mental Health Meeting in Paris, July 2006, Dr Julie Stone was invited to speak to the Unitarian Chapel community in Hampstead, London. A creative and enthusiastic group

of doll makers, led by Claire Julian, has been busy making dolls since then. And the chapel community network is inspiring other groups to become involved.

We continued to value our role as a grassroots project, to which anyone could contribute. A core group of volunteers in Perth checked the Western Australian dolls for suitability, design and road-test new patterns, did the packing, handled enquiries, visited schools and community groups, instigated and encouraged new dollmaking groups and raised funds. All running costs (including travel to KZN) were covered by the individuals concerned.

In December, The Uthando Project was honoured to receive the Group Award by the Western Australian AIDS Council for their annual World AIDS Day celebrations,

2007-8: The whole project picked up pace and expanded in these two years. By the end of 2006, we had sent 8000 dolls to the children of KwaZulu-Natal. By September 2008 we had reached 18,000 dolls.

Our partnership with TREE (Training and Resources in Early Education) enabled the distribution of the dolls through their network of women trained in early education. Both TREE and Rob Smetherham Bereavement Services for Bereaved Children (RobS, the organization now known as dlalanathi) were members of the Psycho-Social cluster within the CINDI organisation centred in Pietermaritzburg.

KZN workshops: Through this partnership we arranged workshops in KZN for training of women in dollmaking. These workshops in March 2007 and October 2008 have forged relationships with many organisations in KZN and gave the Australian women who led the workshops with RobS, the precious and rare experience of being with the women of KZN.

From these workshops we have able to speak about the responsibilities of the gogos (grandmothers), the inroads of HIV/AIDS and poverty and especially the courageous work undertaken by hundreds of local organisations. We show our loving concern by providing dolls and giving some training, but the real work is done by those in South Africa who rise above personal needs and give of themselves to their families and communities.

Through our financial sponsorship, RobS worked with TREE to evaluate their attitudes and practices in the field with regard to the emotional needs of children, as distinct from educational, physical, nutritional needs, etc. This was accomplished in two stages and brought these two organisations closer still. (TREE has trained thousands of women in early childhood education, provides government registered training at many levels, has

earned the highest recognition of their work in the whole of South Africa and has a staff of around 60.)

Pledge to RobS: The vision and expertise shown by RobS is authentic, practical and inspirational to all those who put top priority on the emotional wellbeing of children, and led us to make a 3-year funding pledge of \$27,000 AUD to support their work with communities and other NGOs. This grant enabled employment of a graduate psychologist, a young, dynamic Zulu woman.

We were very happy to apply our funding to an organisation devoted to counselling through play and in training communities where children are at risk. Usually, donor organisations want to see their funding in bricks and mortar or in measurable increments. RobS and Uthando Project are dedicated to greater awareness by the world at large for the psychological needs of children, carers and their communities.

In a quote from RobS Annual Report 2007: "...the journey included the awakening of the hope within us that things can change when people come together to help children". From that same report, in one field where Robs worked with 20 partner organisations, we read that 1817 children were directly reached.

Rachel Rozentals-Thresher was the CEO for RobS (and is still CEO in its new existence as dlalanathi). This is her favourite quote from one of the women following a Uthando Project workshop. It speaks volumes.

"Everybody, when we go home now, lots of us, we are going to the grassroots. And we're having English classes and such. We all know children who have difficulty in their home. Maybe it is our own home. And it is difficult for us to speak to them. And we make all our instruments, that is where we can express. We always see the outward thing easily. They need food, they need clothes okay, go and play. But in the meantime, they are still starving. In the meantime, we can still see, "I don't know how we can help that child."

And this is the tools in our hands. Where we can meet them where they need to be met in their hearts and in their emotions so that they can grow up, work through this emotions, learn to talk, learn to communicate, and to express the feelings, and not become hard in their hearts as many of us are because we haven't had the opportunity. No body came to us to talk and to teach us to talk.

Even for us, we can catch up and communicate what's inside our hearts. I want to encourage all of us that when we go home, and we look at the doll, we must remember that it is an instrument to meet with the heart of someone else."

Visit from TREE Director: For those dollmakers who could not travel to South Africa, there was the opportunity to hear about the situation there first-hand, when in

December 2008, the Director of TREE, Pam Picken, held 30 dollmakers rivetted with her down to earth, yet inspirational, description of TREE's work and vision and the impact on her own life.

From this talk came the move to send dolls to TREE for their Family Play Facilitators. These are women who are trained to teach play to families and groups of children who are too remote to belong to a crèche. Their situation is such that many of these children arrive at primary school never having seen a book or pencil and yet there are high expectations of their formal education.

Pam explained that only 14% of young children experience any "structured" play. The idea is to make up Family Groups of dolls for the Family Play Facilitators to carry with them (this may mean walking for kilometres) and for these dolls to be rich in expression and possibilities of play.

Dolls kept arriving: Through these two years, the characters of the dolls became richer and arrived from all corners of Australia, with perhaps 60 schools and probably 30 organisations contributing. Many schools incorporated the Uthando dollmaking deeply into their general curriculum and often involved their wider community and the media. Our postal data base increased to nearly 200 and our email data base to 500.

Events: We participated in public events focussed on children. Naked dolls were available for children to dress and decorate with beads and shoulder bags. We also distributed information sheets and patterns freely.

Auction and cards: In September 2007 a second doll auction proudly represented the work of Uthando Project and the generosity of Western Australian dollmakers, resulting in major fundraising. Geoffrey Fisher's generosity in producing beautiful photos of the main "Art dolls" in the Auction enabled us to produce a series of gift cards which have been a consistent fundraiser ever since.

Film making: A constant question has been "How do the KZN children respond to our dolls?" We had rich feedback from stories told to us by RobS and TREE, and a few photos of children at crèches receiving the dolls, but realized that given the wide areas covered in rural KZN, the debilitating effects of HIV/AIDS and the proper protection of the privacy of the child, we could not just ask local agencies to "send photos of children with their dolls".

During a visit to KZN, Dr Julie Stone (Melbourne) and film maker, Natalija Brunovs (Perth) following appropriate protocols, and by invitation, made a short documentary film of two Zulu sisters, "Goodness and Happiness" coming to terms with their crucially changed lives after the death of their mother. The film also captures children at play and

the effects of learning how to make a doll at a Uthando Project workshop in Centocow, KZN. This sensitive film can now be shown to schools and groups around the world, to give a deeper picture of our work and its context.

2009: Incorporation and Board. In November 2008, we became a Registered Charity and an Incorporated Body in Nov 2008 with a legal Board.

Honorary Treasurer was Bill Mackintosh (then Lis Hansen); Director, Julie Stone; the CEO, Georgia Efford; Secretary, Judy Mackintosh and Committee Members, Lynne Tognolini and Irene Gill. Dollmakers' Representative was Anne Bell.

Our aim was to be open to self-reflection and to see how we could best serve emotionally disadvantaged children. This applied to children in KZN and, in an important new development, to children living locally and elsewhere.

DVD: The Uthando DVD "Goodness and Happiness, Sisters in KwaZulu-Natal" was successfully and appropriately launched at International Women's Day celebrations in June, 2009. Natalija Brunovs, film maker, introduced the film to a very moved audience.

More dolls sent: Also in June, the Darling Range Rotary Club sent 57 bags of dolls to Durban in their container.

Difficult truths workshop preparation: We prepared for our workshops in Midland and Fremantle, an initiative to impact lives of families and children actually in the Perth region. Relationships evolved with Soroptimists International (Fremantle Branch) and the City of Swan, with over 20 organisations, departments, schools and churches sending representatives to the workshops.

Visitors from KZN: Uthando Project Inc invited Rachel Rozentals-Thresher, CEO of Rob Smetherham Bereavement Service for Children (RobS) and psychologist staff member, Sibongile Mkhize to create a joint Robs/Uthando workshop designed for key organisations in Perth working with disadvantaged children, indigenous, migrant, refugee and foster children. The nature of the workshops (one in Fremantle and the other in Midland) was to weave their train the trainer expertise with communities and NGOs for understanding children's behaviour during grief and loss with Uthando's skills in dollmaking as a positive experience for adults and children and the power of the doll in play for children in distress.

These workshops were called "Difficult Truths, being with children in times of stress, grief and loss". The partnership with RobS felt the most natural thing in the world. There was such unanimity of vision, relationships and process. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed

full-on participation. The dolls did their work in shortcutting “normal” communication and getting down to the issues at hand being brought into the light. Rachel and Sibongile worked seamlessly in drawing everyone in to the realms of childhood.

(Note: RobS is now titled dlananathi, meaning “Let’s Play and Stay Well”)

Income potential: We now had 2 new posters, dollmaking kits, our DVD and greeting cards to sell to create further funds. The power of these marketable items was that all of them would lead to more dolls being made for KZN children and others.

International expansion: Because Uthando Project is a genuine grass roots movement, leadership can emerge and be nurtured anywhere. We saw evidence of this in 2009 with more dollmaking groups in Perth, as well as more schools and seniors groups. A similar project to Uthando began in Malawi, called the Walani Project; an orphanage in India (where the dolls were wrapped in saris) took on the Uthando concept for themselves, and we made connections in Kenya. Emails arrived from England and Scotland telling of dollmaking groups and schools.

2010: This year showed marvellous consolidation of our work and an upgrading of the quality and nature of the dolls. Our Classic Sewn doll pattern resulted in stronger dolls being made with tough “fleecy” knit stretch fabric rather than felt. It may seem a small detail, but to have the arms cut out as part of the body means that the doll withstands vigorous play better. The knit fabric takes embroidery better than felt too. Schools all over the State continued to revisit their dollmaking experience, and new schools tackled it for the first time.

Difficult Truths follow-up: Nearly all of the 30 participants had directly included dollmaking as part of their professional work with children at risk. There were many stories of the transforming influence of the dolls. Rachel and Sibongile had opened doors to new networks, private and professional. For example, dollmaking took place with women and families at the Perth Immigration Residential Centre with very worthwhile results, and with the City of Melville.

Home families: As a result of our work with TREE, many more character dolls were made and grouped in families, eg. granny, dad, older brother, younger sister and baby. Then this family also had a wild animal, two hand puppets, two soft balls, two child wraps for tying dolls to their backs, some doll blankets, tied up in a rectangular play mat as a carrying bundle.

Knitted animal patterns: We formalized our awesome range of patterns of South African animals for dolls or hand puppets from Kay Daw.

Indigenous Australian training: The folk in Halls Creek, in the far north of Western Australia, have been introduced to the dolls for their own children and for Uthando, through the training given by the Maditjil Moorna choir, who visited them for the second time.

Gooseberry Hill Friday dollmakers: A lovely core group of dollmakers continued to enjoy each other's company every Friday, packing, kit-making, designing new patterns, photographing fabulous dolls, recording new arrivals, having coffee and cakes, sewing on hair, stuffing skinny dolls to a more comfortable level, eating a fantastic lunch, welcoming new dollmakers, teachers, overseas visitors. Planning and participating in community events everywhere was another part of their work. All this could not have happened without the constant generosity of hundreds of people who donated wool and materials for the kits, the Home Families and the dolls.