

### Ananni Trauma Centre

Babsie is already seventeen years old, but he looks no older than eleven. He seems to be on the same mental level as a little boy who of about ten months of age. He's got a constant smile on his face. When you call his name, Babsie comes to you and takes your face in his hands. Then he jumps with joy, laughing. Just like a little baby boy would, he thrives on human contact. Hugs are his currency of trade and boy is he open for business! Debbie warns me to hold him tightly, because he is strong and he jumps so much that the two of us are bound to fall over. When I take hold of him he stops jumping and lets out a purr of delight. Such a true embrace I've never felt before...

'Dynamite sure comes in small packages,' I think to myself as Debbie Griesel walks over to receive us. The small holding on the outskirts of Vereeniging could just as well be in the heart of Texas with the horses playfully galloping in the background and the white pole fence leads us down the driveway. Gusts of wind however throw around the Eucalyptous trees above our heads and the pale August sky confirms it: this is an African farm, run by African people in the heart of Africa. She welcomes us to Ananni and we sit down to talk in the kitchen next to the kids' dining area.

An expression of contentment sits on her face. Bubbling with testimonies on all the different times that the Lord helped them, she tells us of times that were trying; of times that she was angry at God and of times she was ill. But every story ends with how the Lord came through for them. Her eyes shine as she tells us that what they are doing is nothing less than a calling from God. That is how Ananni came to life: Through a prophetic word in 2001, confirmed in 2004 and again in 2005.

"When I told my husband, Fred, I want to start a trauma centre, he said I was crazy," she giggles. "But we crunched the numbers and started preparing to start Ananni."

So Fred Griesel put his business up for sale and the two properties that they have been investing in needed to be sold too. These transactions would finance the dream. But Debbie still kept the backdoor open. Thinking she will be able to live her destiny part time, she held on to her job.

Somehow nothing seemed to work out. They couldn't get the centre registered, couldn't get the land needed and couldn't get Fred's business sold. She smiles when she tells us that the Lord then decided to do it on her behalf: she got into a terrible argument with her boss. After standing in a very well paying position for 12 years, she quit her job in September of 2005. By the end of October that same year, everything had fallen into place. Both their houses were sold as was Fred's business and they found a perfect spot where they proceeded to build Ananni Trauma Centre. It is no coincidence that Ananni means *Guarded by God*.

A little boy passes by and respectfully says hi. Debbie explains that he is not the youngest, but he is the smallest built of all the children at the centre. Careful for him not to hear, she tells us his story. That little boy was the victim of horrendous sexual abuse, by his mother, father, grandfather and his uncle.

The children reach the centre through the courts, welfare and social services. Some grew up here, some came from Abraham Kriel Children's Home where you have to leave when you reach the age of 18. So with no parents and nowhere to go, they have ended up at Ananni.

The children each get a disability grant of which R200 are theirs to spend on toiletries and personal needs. The remaining R800 per person goes to the running of the centre. This buys clothes and shoes, food and a funeral policy for each person.

Four children are still in the process of registering for grants. The centre relies on the private sector very heavily. Food is always needed. Feeding a troop this size is a mean feat. They go through 11 loaves of bread a day! And bread is only on the menu for lunch. Breakfast is a variety of porridges (never the same kind twice in a row) and supper is a cooked meal with vegetables and meat.

Clothes mostly come sponsored but clothes for boys in sizes small and medium are always welcome.

The centre uses Kopanong Public Hospital for their medical needs. This is one of the Griesels' biggest frustrations. Except in the case of an emergency, that is all that the centre can afford. But the service at this hospital is shocking. She tells us how she waited to see a doctor for four hours with a child who had had a stroke.

Dylan\* was featured on a Carte Blanche a while ago. He grew up with the dogs, literally. He lived in the doghouse, ate from their bowl and spent most of his days with them. He barked and walked on all fours when he arrived at Ananni. He was 12 then. Today he is 18 and still cannot talk, feed himself, bathe himself or do anything except go to the bathroom. Judging by his tiny frame, I wouldn't guess that he is any older than 13. He looks down when we say hello and I notice his open hands, tense as if he is unable to close them. He just sits on his bed. It is unreal to me that someone can do this kind of thing to a child.

The boys look especially thin. Fred explains that they will never pick up weight. The centre where they lived previously fed them porridge and cow's lungs. Lungs apparently contain a germ that inhibits the formation of white blood cells and causes children to become underweight.

Besides the 27 special needs children, Debbie has her own kids too. The oldest of which is a 22 year old commercial pilot in training. Her youngest son is in Grade 7. Then there is her daughter. Little Charmaine arrived at

Ananni at age 3. At that point in time, she and Debbie were worlds apart and couldn't understand each other as Charmaine could speak only Sesotho. Today the young lady is 6 years of age, fluent in Afrikaans and in the process of being legally adopted by Debbie and Fred. She attends Parkieland pre-primary and keeps Mom and Dad on their toes. Dressed in pink and sheer attitude, she comes in to say hi with a hug and 'Mommy' gets a special kiss.

All the kids at Ananni call her "Mommy" and Fred "Dadda". That is after all the role that they play in their lives. Fred is the father figure that few of these kids can say they have ever had. He works especially close with the boys and teaches them respect for themselves and others. Coming from tempestuous backgrounds, the boys often arrive bearing grudges, violent tendencies and without respect for women. I struggle to picture a strict expression on his face. His sense of humour constantly leaves one anticipating his next quirk. Fred takes care of the yard, the garden and the buildings religiously. The boys help him with that and the girls help inside. Each person at Ananni has his or her own responsibilities. As most of the residents arrive at the centre with bipolar disorder or chronic depression, keeping busy is part of keeping well. He refers to his wife fondly and in the way they interact with each other it is clear to outsiders, that they are heavily blessed in the happily married department.

Debbie proudly tells us of their successes. That is what makes all their efforts worthwhile.

"Our desire is not for them to stay here forever. Some of them won't be able to make it out there, but some will. Our desire is to equip them to leave and to go out in the world one day," she says. Young Janine\* came to Ananni in December 2007. She was declared to be schizophrenic, crazy, would never fit into society and never amount to anything. The next January, Debbie enrolled her at the technical high school. She made her matric with exemption at the end of that year and got a bursary for further study from the SANDF.

Peter\* was involved in drug abuse when he came to Ananni. He didn't fit anywhere in life. Today he is doing his course at the local butchery and equipping himself to be block man.

Another one of Debbie's children is currently doing his apprenticeship as a screen builder.

Liezl\* was a learner at the local school for the mentally disabled. She was one of nine children and her twin brother died at birth. Her mother told her that the wrong twin had died and accused her of being a lesbian at the age of 11. Such a stormy childhood of emotional and physical abuse produced a child that screamed and threw tantrums to the extent that the entire school came to a standstill at one of her episodes. The school psychiatrist contacted Debbie to fetch Liezl\* from the school.

"I could hear her screaming over the phone," she says. "But I said I would come to fetch her". This child had been shown away from institutions such as Sterkfontein.

Upon returning to the school after a couple of months, the local psychiatrist couldn't believe that the child sitting next to Debbie was the same Liezl\*.

"What did you do?" asked the doctor. "What is your secret?"

Before she could respond, Liezl\* told the doctor: "She just pressed the right buttons!"

Debbie and Fred seem to be excellent 'button pushers'. Love, discipline, acceptance and above all a place to belong in this world is what they offer the kids at Ananni.

She kisses us when we leave and we know we'll be back. After spending an hour with Debbie Griesel we already feel like we belong at Ananni. The need is so great but the fact that there are people out there like Fred and Debbie may just be what will save this terrible world from itself. They inspire us to the extent that we look for a small little bit to do to make a difference ourselves. If we all do a little bit, that must amount to something...