

Linking hands to see children thrive

DEBBIE WYBROW

Bolander's coverage of Baby Suzi's abandonment last year heightened awareness of the option families in crisis have instead to safely relinquish their babies, which has resulted in three more babies being caught in the safety net provided by the Helderberg BabySaver.

Bolander's "Baby Suzi" stories not only drew in this community: in Washington DC in July this year, hearts and minds were moved when I translated the African principles of Ubuntu to parts of her life story.

I spoke of how it used to be that an African village would raise an African child, before the pandemic of HIV and Aids felled our middle generations, leaving behind the elderly and other children to raise children, and our society self-destructed.

I shared my horror at the violence, abuse and neglect experienced by children where the spirit and principles of Ubuntu are decidedly absent, and then I drew on examples of courageous intervention by those serving children and by standers-by alike; on the generosity of strangers who want to see children thriving; on the inordinate selflessness of temporary caregivers – and on those incredible people who step in to permanently nurture and parent the un-parented. Below is an extract from my speech...

Last November, Baby Suzi joined the ranks of the 300 children per month in South Africa who survive being abandoned. 65% are newborn, like her; 90% are under the age of 1.

Fortunately for her, she avoided being one of the two thirds who die when unsafely abandoned. She survived to be counted. No such tally is made of those who do not survive: neither the police nor the mortuaries keep separate data for children no one knows.

Anything "safe" is a relative term in Suzi's context. There was little safe about the green rubbish bin in which she was placed on an ignominious corner outside a local store.

The editor of our local newspaper takes up Suzi's story: "And so it was that

when Cedric heard what he thought was a cellphone ringing in the trash bin, he stopped. Uncertain at first, and then he looked inside the small circular opening, and saw only a plastic bag. And then it moved..."

Cedric describes what happened next: "It crossed my mind that people may think I'm a bin picker, but I didn't care, and just forced the lid off. Then when I'd torn off the two plastic bags, the first thing I saw was the tiniest hand, and then a face, and I shouted: 'It's a baby!'"

"I thought I may have to resuscitate her, and was worried because she was so incredibly delicate."

The Bolander editor, Carolyn Frost, who happened to be driving by, stopped because of the commotion, and called the Helderberg BabySaver Team.

Security and an ambulance soon arrived. Cedric insisted on accompanying her to hospital. "The paramedic said she could only have been in the bags for a couple of minutes, and would have suffocated very soon," he'd said.

Our Wandisa social workers met this hours-old miracle child for the first time shortly afterwards. She had absolutely nothing, apart from life itself.

We had gently removed her dirty babygro to save for her "Memory Box". I placed her into her incubator but could not bear the thought of her lying there all alone in the world.

I felt every hour without her feeling physical contact, was an indictment on me.

I put in place a team of women well-known to me, whom I could trust to hold her, hug her, sing over her and see out her first few days with her. And we took turns, a social love story of sisterhood.

I battled to sleep. How could I when she was literally down the road? I thought of the myriad of factors that might have driven her mother to act as she did.

Did she know what she was doing? Did she choose the best option in the circumstances? It is likely that if she had support and had not felt so alone,

she might have been able to carry her baby further along.

And finally, I wondered what would I do if I was the one who was frightened, possibly physically weak and emotionally spent, and unable to place my foot in front of the other even one more time?

We will never know what drives each individual act of abandonment. And we have no right to condemn what we understand little about.

What we do know is that when others step in, motivated only by common good, instead of death, there can be life.

In Suzi's case, so many strangers linked hands to do the right thing.

Baby Suzi was cared for by a local family in their home, while the legal process of declaring her adoptable took its course. She is now with her forever family, and her adoption will shortly be finalised.

Fast forward from mid-2018 to mere months later, and I am privileged to share this update on Suzi with permission from her doting adoptive mom.

During the time we spent together this week, we delighted in her huge eyes that sparkle with spunk and zest for life.

Fresh from a party beforehand, she babbled contentedly (laughingly refusing to say "Mama" which we know she often does!).

She was an integral part of our conversation as she polished off her iced tea and then made her way through our fruit smoothies.

I was surprised to hear how much she loves broccoli and spinach (true story), and could better relate to the huge pink lollies on top of her recent first birthday cake first prize.

Her mother's encouragement as Suzi took a couple of "baby steps" was heartwarming: I am sure that before this



■ Baby Suzi finding her feet...

week is out she will be toddling, independently, yet always within her mom's radar.

To say she is healthy and well would be an understatement: she is positively thriving and her future has never looked brighter.

I look forward to sharing more in the weeks to come about the impact our community's intervention has had on other children's lives.

● Debbie Wybrow is an attorney at Wybrow-Oliver Attorneys, Wandisa™ Child Protection and The Bayakhanya Foundation.

● The excerpt is from the

opening keynote address at the National Council for Adoption's 2018 Conference, Washington D.C., titled *Adopt the New African Way: Embrace in the Unity of Ubuntu; Empower Children; Exalt in their Significance in the Global Village*.

● Credit to Carolyn Frost, Bolander, for quotations from the articles she wrote on Baby Suzi's story.

● The Helderberg Baby Saver is located in Somerset West at CHOICES in Schapenberg Road (off Old Sir Lowry's Pass Road), Somerset West. For details, visit www.babysaver.co.za



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