



# WHERE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH

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*Tales of Can-Do Teachers in South Africa's  
No-Fee Public Schools*

**KIMON PHITIDIS**

  
BOOK**STORM**





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*Author's note:*

*To maintain their anonymity, in some instances I have changed the names of people mentioned as well as some of the context of how they are mentioned.*

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A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW  
BEYOND SMALL-TOWN  
EXPECTATIONS

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**WILTON PHILLIPS**

*Gansbaai Academia, Gansbaai, Western Cape*



**A**s a schoolboy Wilton Phillips's dream was to reach beyond the life of his family of teachers in the remote Overberg region of the Western Cape and seek his fortune as an investment analyst in the big city. Fortunately for the learners of Gansbaai Academia, fate had other plans. While he is qualified as an investment analyst, today Wilton teaches accounting and economic and management sciences (EMS) and is the subject head for commerce at the school.

"Morning ladies and gentlemen, *goeie môre dames en here*," he greets the 23 learners in his matric accounting class before running through the corrections from the previous day's work. It's all cash sales, credit sales, cost of sales. In 42 days they will write their first matric exams. Heads down, calculators out and pens working down the columns, they get on with the quiet, orderly business of accounting.

Wilton circulates amongst the desks. The learners wear maroon *Matric '18* jerseys with their names embroidered over their hearts and a chortling cartoon shark, which wears the school tie, on their backs. Wilton checks each learner's work, placing a reassuring hand on his or her shoulder or offering a word of encouragement and a quick calculation to help out.

"Fezile," he says to a boy in the back row. "Come sit up front so I can help you; you've got some catch up to do." They move on to the work of the day, developing a three-month budget for Mary's small business, projecting 60% cash sales and 40% credit sales. They work through the expense items. "I'm not going to give you this one on a platter; go back and look at what information they have given you and work from there ...

“A reminder that I need your signed permission slips from your parents tomorrow for the accounting camp,” he says as the siren signals the end of the first period. He reminds them about the meal times, late-night snacks and the *me time* in the programme. “Nice day, *lekker dag*,” he says as the class files out. He spends a few quiet moments with Fezile, finding out why he has not been at school ... giving him work to help catch up.

Most of the children at this no-fee school are the first in their families to sit in a matric class – and certainly the first with any hope of a tertiary education. Before the school opened in 2010, the only high schools for Gansbaai children were too far away – in Hermanus or Caledon – and transport was expensive. After primary school, many faced a teenage life of staying at home. Some were drawn into the lucrative world of perlemoen poaching that dominates the underground economy of this coastline.

On a map of the Western Cape, Gansbaai is a finger up the coast from Cape Agulhas – the southernmost tip of Africa. It faces the popular holiday town of Hermanus from across the vast curve of Walker Bay. The school draws children from the three primary schools of Masakhane, Blompark and Gansbaai that have typically been split along racial lines. That makes Gansbaai Academia unusual in its diversity.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen, *goeie môre dames en here*,” Wilton says as the Grade 10s file in for their accounting class. They draw up an income statement and balance sheet for Krynauw Stores. Learners work line by line through the numbers and entries ... sales, cost of sales, gross profit. There is a discrepancy between what the debtor’s figure is and what the exercise tells them it should be. “They owe us,” he reminds the class, “*hulle skuld ons*.”

Matric exams are two years, 42 days and a dream away for this class. There is some shuffling and scuffling. A girl with a towering bun of braids throws an eraser to her friend across the class, giggling quietly into her hand. A girl with a competing braid-tower blows gum bubbles when the teacher’s back is turned.

“Nice day, *lekker dag*,” Wilton says as the second period ends.



Wilton is a messiah. When children make their subject choices in Grade 9 he encourages them to choose the career-gateway subject of accounting. The

reality is that many students are likely to choose subjects for an easier matric pass over the more hard-won opportunity of a career in commerce.

*“Our role here is to give these kids a vision,” he tells me.  
“I say, ‘Study for university,’ but Mom or Dad back home say,  
‘Pass my child’ – those are two different messages.”  
He offers them a bird’s-eye view. He encourages them to think  
beyond the expectations of this small coastal town.*

He helps them to imagine walking up the steps of the University of Cape Town (UCT) 200 kilometres and several mountain passes to the west, or the University of the Free State (UFS) or Wits – a lifetime away, hundreds of kilometres inland of where they sit in Wilton’s class. It is when working beyond the curriculum that he believes the kids really see the opportunity.

He is the coordinator of the JSE Investment Challenge at the school, and he is more than qualified for this role. Wilton was part of the national winning team when he was a schoolboy at Hottentots-Holland High School in Somerset West, and also won the university competition when he was enrolled at Stellenbosch University.

School teams from across the country simulate trading R1 million on the stock exchange, competing to generate the biggest return on investment. In 2017, his team of four investors beat thousands of South African schools by making the biggest gains in their investment in the equity category of the competition. That makes Wilton the only person in the competition’s 42-year history to have won it in three different categories.

To claim their prize, Wilton’s learners travelled from Gansbaai to Cape Town, boarded a flight to Johannesburg and caught a 14-minute ride on the Gautrain to Sandton, the country’s commercial capital.

Four boys, in dark-yellow-trim blazers pinned and embroidered with scrolls and badges, beam in a glossy photograph, flanking Wilton and the Chief Financial Officer of the JSE. They include Llewellyn Davids, one of South Africa’s top matric accounting students in 2017 with a result of 92%. He is now enrolled for first-year medicine on a full bursary at Stellenbosch University.

“He was getting in the 80s for accounting in Grade 10, but I told him I expected a 95% from him in matric,” says Wilton. “But I told him: ‘You will

need my help. Each additional 1% takes work.” Wilton made sure Llewellyn had the resources and gave him additional material so that he worked ahead of the class. They discussed his future and his work at break times between classes. “He was always a committed child, but what he needed was the motivation.”

This year’s team of Grade 10s already working towards their matric JSE Investment Challenge, is an all-girls one. On the day I visit they crowd around a table in the restaurant (for the hospitality students). They neatly push gold-sprayed Coca-Cola bottles with bristling fynbos arrangements aside to make space for their school-issued tablets. They battle to trade because the computer centre doesn’t have connectivity and the Wi-Fi they rely on is mostly down. This is one of many challenges Wilton and his teams work through to compete with the country’s top private schools. The teams from other schools also have the advantage of generations of their families being invested in the country’s wealth. The children of Gansbaai are breaking new ground.

A week before their JSE victory, Wilton’s team of boys were in Sandton to take part in CharterQuest – another national schools commerce competition. They made it to the top six out of 210 schools. At that competition they presented solutions to the business problems faced by a dual-listed international mining company. They worked towards a win-win settlement to resolve a strike at a Canadian mine, and they worked on a break-even analysis to determine if the company should invest more in deep or shallow mining.

“We had to pull together everything we had learned in EMS and accounting and I had to bring in university-level economics as well,” says Wilton. The team worked late nights and through the Easter holidays to prepare for the five-day trip to Sandton where they took part in various rounds of the competition between the distractions and temptations of buffet meals, as-many-cooldrinks-as-you-like dinners, photo sessions, hotel rooms with fluffy towels, and prize-giving events. The panel included directors of Telkom, Philips and the JSE, and the boys were offered mentorships and bursaries to help them through their tertiary education.

Wilton talks of a declining trend in learners choosing accounting in the province and nationally. “Those competitions show kids what accounting can do for them. That is my strategy to grow our numbers in accounting.” It’s a subject choice that he hopes his Grade 9s will make after touching on accounting as part of the EMS curriculum.

## WHERE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH

He reminds his learners that accounting is a scarce skill by showing them the job advertisements in the Sunday papers. He compares accounting to tourism – one of their other subject choices. “There are opportunities in accounting but also more generally in commerce – marketing, asset management – relevance for me is very important. It’s the relevance that gets the attention.”



Gansbaai Academia is a dual-medium school, offering learners a choice of tuition in English or Afrikaans. While Wilton teaches his older learners in both languages, he teaches two of his Grade 9 EMS classes in English and two in Afrikaans. The English classes are almost exclusively made up of black learners, while the Afrikaans classes are comprised mainly of coloured and white learners.



“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, *goeie middag dames en here*,” Wilton greets the first Grade 9 EMS class taught in English. A boy looks down as he walks in and places his hat – dark-brown felt with a yellow feather cocked out of the ribbon – on the table beside his textbook. He is one of the Xhosa boys who have returned from the June initiation ceremonies on the mountain. These boys are allowed to wear hats – an extended part of the ritual – to school, but have to remove them in class.

This lesson considers the creditor's journal of Books Galore. "Who did this business buy in credit from?" Wilton asks the class. "Is the stationery part of trading stock or office supplies? ... Let's consider the nature of the business ..."

Each of Wilton's Grade 9 classes is tightly packed with about 50 learners. He strides up and down the narrow aisles between desks as he takes them through the exercises. "Accounting is a puzzle," he reminds the class. "All you have to do is place the pieces at the right spot."

"Nice day," he says as the class files out.

"*Wiskunde, mense!* (Maths, people!)" he reminds the Afrikaans class that battles through the maths of working out percentages before they can get to the accounting. During the course of the morning he repeats the same exercise four times, from English to Afrikaans and back again. The creditor's journal written up on the blackboard is all columns and figures and arrows and ticks and headings written in two languages and smudgy rub-outs as he clears the answers to start afresh. By lesson four, he chooses to start again, writing up the journal in Afrikaans only.

"*Maak jou mond toe, sit jou gedagtes in jou pen, en skryf neer* (Close your mouth, put your thoughts into your pen and write them down)," he smilingly tells a restless class. Children sit two to a desk. A boy in the back row – neatly turned out in his blazer – sits upright, an eye on the board, another on his workbook, checking and correcting his creditor's journal. His finger follows the line of his figures. He reads ahead in the textbook. He occasionally looks over at the workbook of his neighbour, who rests his cheek comfortably in his palm.

This boy works on a Maltese cross engulfed in flames and marked "RIP" in a rectangular plaque in thick black type. Chain links and twists of barbed wire wrap around the cross with each glide of his pen. As the lesson draws to a close, he joins two strands of chain with a perfectly symmetrical and two-dimensional padlock. Click.

"*Lekker dag* (Nice day)," Wilton says as the learners pack their bags.



Wilton tells me of the many university lectures he sat through wishing they would end. "It's easy to stand in front of a class and talk for three hours," he says. "But it is difficult to listen for three hours. We must bear in mind the

experience of the learner. It is the minority of kids who are inspired and who want to be at school.” He believes it is his role to discover the language of learning and the interests of each child, to speak to them in that language and to help them create the links with the outside world.

*“I don’t believe in stupid, I believe in hard work,”  
says Wilton. “I believe that the God that I praise don’t just place  
certain people in certain places because of the places they come from.  
It is more difficult for our kids, but they have the potential to get there.  
As teachers, we must try and set the platform straight so that we see  
our kids compared with the best.”*

“When we get a kid to university, the playing field is levelled and those that we get there perform well. In hostel, they get the food and the place to study just like a kid who may have come from Sandton in Joburg. That is our aim.” Alumni who have gone to university are invited back to the school to tell their stories. “Without role models, without references, kids limit themselves,” Wilton says.

Last year, the guest speaker at the school’s prize giving was Siviwe Yuyu, Gansbaai Academia head boy in 2013. His parents died when he was in primary school and he was raised by his sister in Zwelihle, a township on the outskirts of Hermanus. He was determined to attend Gansbaai Academia rather than the no-fee schools on offer in Hermanus but he lived outside the area. Against his sister’s wishes, he moved alone into his uncle’s empty Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) house in nearby Stanford and took a taxi to school every day. “From staying alone and having all of that responsibility, he developed strong leadership characteristics,” says Wilton. He was mentored and supported at the school and was given extra work to extend him.

Today he is studying marine sciences on a full bursary at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. At the prize giving he told the learners of Gansbaai Academia about his childhood and his aspirations as a young marine scientist. He told them about the two trips he made to Boston in the US to complete his practical work. He told them, “When the lecturer opened the door to my first university lecture, it felt like he was opening the door to my future ...”

Being a small school in a small town, successes are noted and celebrated. The entrance hallway is crowded with certificates and trophies. Framed

photographs document the school's achievements over its eight-year history. "Shark Alley" displays photographs of the children who have made it into the Boland regional sports teams. It includes plaques with quotes about the great white sharks that feed the mythology of the school and its culture.

Gansbaai is a fishing town and the capital of South Africa's great white shark cage-diving industry. Tourists from up-country with money to spare turn off the R43 and drive past the school and the African Penguin and Seabird Sanctuary before reaching the harbour with its fleet of hulking vessels with names like *Megalodon II* and *Apex Predator*. Steel cages are attached to their sterns, with crusty, barnacled ropes and flotation devices affixed to them.

Framed newspaper cuttings hanging on the walls of the school's entrance hall tell the stories of Bianca de Koning, head girl in 2013 and the daughter of an OK Foods cashier, who achieved five distinctions and is enrolled in a degree in the humanities at UFS; and Andisiwe Wulana, pictured outside the family's Masakhane shack, who is now enrolled at UFS.

Andisiwe was not at school the day matric results were handed out. She was out doing casual work to help support the family. Gansbaai principal Tommy Wilson crossed the R43 to Masakhane in his white BMW to deliver her results. He drove slowly past the shacks, built with shiny corrugated steel bought from the nearby Build It, past the simple RDP box houses painted in light blues and greens, past the container shop with its row of smiling pigs' heads displayed on a table on the street, until he came to her shack of planks and corrugated panels. I picture him beaming behind his bristling moustache and dark glasses as he hands the results to her mother. "About 15 people came out of that shack, all living in that one small space," he says. "And she got five A's living in those circumstances."

Wilton shows me a Facebook post of Andisiwe's, her graduation cap tilted on her head as she kisses her mother in the university gardens. "I would like to thank my high school accounting teacher, Mr Wilton Phillips, for believing in me," she writes. "You played a huge role in making me believe in myself ... you see potential that no one sees in each and every student. I Thank You!"

*"My biggest reward," Wilton says, "is when these kids come back to the school to tell me how they are doing, or when I meet them outside of the school and hear about their university studies."*

He scrolls through his WhatsApp feed, showing me other messages from past students: smiling emojis and popping champagne bottles, words of thanks, requests for advice about university subject choices, and Christmas and birthday blessings ...



While Wilton was raised in Grabouw, his family is from nearby Stanford. “I am teaching from my roots and ploughing back,” he says. The son of a school teacher and the nephew of a host of teachers and principals, he was determined not to become a teacher. “School never ended for my family.”

He describes a close extended family that looked for any excuse to get together, with each person contributing their speciality to the table. As they enjoyed the platters of fish and biryani, freshly baked breads and peppermint tart, the talk was always about education. He was a quiet child, more inclined to listen than to talk. He absorbed his father’s concerns for school safety and his belief in extending children through extracurricular activities. He heard his school-principal aunt’s aspirations for her school. He followed the debates about how to help resolve the problems faced by children in their classes.

His father offered extra classes on Saturdays, and more classes still on Sundays after church. He would rise as early as 03h00 to spend his early mornings at a desk in the sitting room when the family was asleep, marking work, setting assignments and working through the mountains of administration.

“And now I have become my father,” he smiles, describing the bags of paperwork he takes home. In the Stanford house he shares with his grandmother, he too sits at a desk in the living room late into the night. He sets test papers in English and Afrikaans, writes out marking memos, marks classwork and writes the reports required of him as the head teacher of Grade 11, Head of Department for commerce and as a member of the SGB.

After school, he completed a Bachelor of Commerce at Stellenbosch University. While his sights were set on an Honours in investment management, God intervened, he suggests, by derailing his plans with a financial problem and one failed exam.

One afternoon his mother, father and little brother visited his small rectangle of a residence room at Stellenbosch University with treats and

snacks. Looking out the fourth-floor window at the calming oak-lined views over Victoria Street, they sat in a row on the single bed – across from the shelf lined with textbooks and tomes of advice from Warren Buffett – and considered his options.

The family pull towards a career in education was stronger than he imagined. “My father told me, ‘If you are going to go into teaching you are not going to do it halfway, you do it for at least three years and take it from there.’” The education sector needed commerce teachers, and Wilton was awarded a bursary to complete the PGCE that qualified him as a teacher.

“But once I came to this school, the bug bit; my love for commerce and teaching grew here.” Even though he was later accepted into the Honours course at UCT and completed it part time while teaching, he has no plan to leave for the promises of the big city. “The investments I manage now are these kids,” he says. “I love seeing them grow.”

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# FROM TRUANT SCHOOLGIRL TO THE BEATING HEART OF A THOUSAND HILLS

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**PERTUNIA LUTHULI**

*Mcopheleli Primary School, KwaDabeka, KwaZulu-Natal*



One of Pertunia Luthuli's earliest memories is of sitting alongside a cool, soothing rectangle of blue. More accurately – using a maths teacher's terminology – it was a cuboid of sorts.

As a child she spent idle days and hours at a public swimming pool in KwaMashu when she should have been at school. For most of those hours she was blissfully alone. Sometimes other adults walked by or came to swim. Sometimes other children who bunked school joined her. Nobody ever asked her why she wasn't at school.

"I could just chill there, looking at the water and sometimes getting inside the water. It was so blue. It was so nice. All my problems would go away when I was there. I couldn't care less about anything – what was happening at home, the teachers, the school ..." she smiles, lost briefly in remembering.

She is older now and her days as a teacher at Mcopheleli Primary School in the hills of KwaDabeka, north-west of Durban, seldom allow for the pleasures of memory and reflection.

I spend the day with her as she works through a revolving door of maths and natural sciences lessons for the three Grade 7 classes of the school. As one class leaves, the next one files in and the lesson of the day is repeated. In this way she delivers six back-to-back lessons and sits with learners to help them with their work during the break time that should offer pause to her day.

"It's been raining cats and dogs in Durban this week," she tells me, indicating the empty chairs in what should be a packed first-period class. Some children don't make it to school when it rains. It is also the last week of term and tests have been written. A time when the regular rhythm of schools tends to unravel.

“Are we ready?” she shouts to the class in the manner of a sports coach preparing her team for the most important match of the season.

The question is written into her characteristic gap-tooth smile, her imposing height bent forward, the pattern of long braids tied back close to her head, and her fist clenched at the waist as if poised to punch through the clouds. A huge, yellow protractor is slung over her shoulder as if an accessory to her blue-and-yellow-print dress.

“Yes!” the learners reply in chorus.

“I said ... *Are ... We ... Ready?*”

“Yes!” louder this time.

And they begin the lesson, a revision of how to construct angles.

The classroom that contains this group of ready learners stands tired but steadfast against the assault of time. Ceiling boards are missing or broken, walls are grimy and stained from years of Prestik, and the laminated floor is worn into dark maps that show the pattern of scraping chairs and shoes over the years. Some windowpanes are missing, others are webbed with deep cracks. A fluorescent globe attempts to stutter into life while others lie in darkness.

Pertunia stands with two rulers mimicking the hands of a clock, slowly moving the one while the class chants the kinds of angles they form.

*acute, acute, acute*

*right!*

*obtuse, obtuse, obtuse*

*straight!*

*reflex, reflex, reflex*

*revolution!*

She constructs angles on the board using stubs of white chalk and the giant protractor.

Workbooks are handed out and each child is tasked with constructing five angles. Some work quickly and neatly through the task. Some stare at the exercise, hoping that a realisation will come to them. The class is quiet as Pertunia circulates – checking work, offering encouragement and gently admonishing those who can’t find their protractors.



Pertunia's class is very different to the early-1970s ones she bunked from in self-defence as she relaxed into the cool soothing blueness of the KwaMashu public pool.

"My Grade 1 was bad. Grade 2 was bad. Grade 3 was terrible ... until I came here to live with my mom. I didn't like school; I was so afraid of the stick. I was beaten a lot because of my naughtiness," she chuckles softly.

Pertunia's mother had left KwaMashu to move in with the man she married in Clermont, where Pertunia lives today. Pertunia was left in the family home, living with her mother's brothers and sisters, Gogo and Mkhulu until she was about eight years old. "We were the poorest family there," she says. "The poorest."

"So when a teacher asked us to bring something to school, like a slate or a pen, I didn't go to school because I didn't have. If the slate was broken, it was broken; there was no money for such things at home. When the bell rang at the end of the day, I would take my bag and pretend I had been at school."

I imagine her weighing up her options. *Pool or stick*. Sometimes she would pretend to be sick and would go with Gogo to the house where she was employed to make traditional beer. A kinder place than school, she tells me, where she was always offered a tall, rich glass of the pre-fermented brew.



"Why do we need angles?" Pertunia asks the next Grade 7 class. "Where are the angles in this class?" The room comes alive with angles on the doors, windows, ceilings and blackboard. The desks up front are not flush against each other. The angle between them is acute.

She tosses a question, like a soft ball, to a boy who is playing with his protractor rather than paying attention. He looks at her blank-faced, pulled out of his imaginary world. "I know you know this," she says to him. "But concentrate, come back to class."

The class breaks into rhythmic clapping, congratulating the boy for bringing his attention back to the class.

*clap, clap, clap*  
*clap, clap, clap*  
*clap, clap, clap*  
*clap*

A girl with a yellow Girl Guide scarf worn proudly around her neck volunteers to draw a 62-degree angle on the board using the yellow protractor.

“What kind of angle is that?” Pertunia asks the dreamy boy. He has such a sweet face. I imagine him as gentle, softly spoken and polite at home. But he needs to pay attention.

“It’s an acute angle, ma’am,” he answers in an almost-whisper after a little prompting.

“You are right, well done!”

The class claps for him again. He is all attention now.

Pertunia has learned to be firm but loving and to be sensitive or sympathetic to what might lie beyond the face that a child displays at school.

“Was maths nice today?” is the sports-coach cry that ends her lessons.

“Yes!”

“Was maths fun today?”

“Yes!” the learners shout louder.



“I relate very well here to the kids who are from poor families,” Pertunia tells me. “They like me a lot. I have been through what they are going through, and I bring the stories of my life into my teaching.”

Like the boy in her class who was lost in his imaginary world, Pertunia was a quiet child in her early years of schooling. “I was scared. And I was shy. Very, very shy. I could not talk about anything. Even at school, if the teacher asked me, ‘Why were you absent yesterday?’ nothing would come out of my mouth, because I was scared of everyone.”



She recalls another familiar childhood geometric figure – not a rectangle this time but a line, where the tar road crumbled to its end and the gravel road continued down into a little valley “where it was even darker than on the tar road”. With a quickening heart and a *scrunch, scrunch* underfoot, she would make her way down through the deepening dark to the shebeen where her uncle sent her sometimes late at night.

With a half-jack of Smirnoff in one hand and a brown quart of Milk Stout in the other she would feel the cool of the night on her bare arms as quick steps took her up the gravel road, back onto the tar, past the rows of identical, four-room face-brick houses sitting darkly beneath asbestos roofs, until she entered the kitchen door of the family home.

“He liked to drink the Smirnoff on top of what he had already drunk,” she says of her uncle. And there were other abuses that she suffered in the kitchen of that family home in the dark hours while Gogo slept.

“Life was hard,” she says of her early years, “and I was so scared.” She stands up and turns her face away from me, overcome by memories that, she tells me, she seldom entertains anymore. “If Gogo had known about these things,” she says, almost to herself, “*hell* would have broken loose.”

Today Pertunia is the coordinator of the school committee that supports children who may be in need or who are facing difficulties. For those who are hungry, a five-litre ice-cream tub of food is sent home with them every day. The committee facilitates medical care for children who are HIV-positive. It has placed children with special needs at other schools. It has worked with social workers to resolve cases of sexual abuse.

“The welfare kids here keep me grounded. It happened to me; it is happening to other kids. I can’t say it’s normal, but the way it is happening, it seems like it’s normal. Sometimes it makes me feel better that I went through that and conquered and became a teacher as I am now. So those circumstances made me stronger.”

Pertunia motivated for this committee to continue with its work despite the troubles at the school. Teachers have stopped all school-related activities they used to facilitate outside of the classroom, she tells me. The committees that are the engine room of most schools have wound down. The extramural programme collapsed three years ago and won’t be revived anytime soon.

She doesn’t want to talk about what is happening. But I gather that things are bad. There are two opposing factions of teachers. There are several

investigations underway. It has all been reported in the press. The school is waiting for officials from the Department of Basic Education to resolve the situation before committees and extramurals resume.

It sounds like a microcosm of the stasis of national government as the many commissions of enquiry grind through the tedious proceedings of their work. And while politicians and government officials manoeuvre to protect their own narrow interests, the functions and activities that should serve the interests of the children of the school have crumbled.

The school stands on shaky political foundations. It was built in the early 1980s and demolished soon thereafter, having been badly vandalised during the political violence that played out in the province at the time. A plaque outside the administration block shows that the newly built school was reopened in 1994 by democratic South Africa's first Minister of Education, Sibusiso Bengu.

The school was originally built to service the families of surrounding KwaDabeka A and Clermont, which Pertunia describes as middle-class township areas. But most of those families prefer to send their children to former Model-C schools or "Indian" schools in town. Today Mcopheleli Primary mostly services the families of the prosaically named Sub 5, an informal settlement of corrugated sheets and discarded planks that has sprung up nearby.

It is the largely unemployed parents and young adults from that community who Pertunia serves in the evenings when she returns to Mcopheleli Primary to teach at the Adult Education and Training (AET) school she set up with her sister and two other teachers in 2013. They have grown their numbers over the years and formalised the school so that it is partly government-funded. Today more than 200 adults attend in the evenings. Many of them are Grade 12 learners who performed poorly in matric in previous years and are working towards improving their marks, and their prospects.

Pertunia was posted to Mcopheleli Primary ten years ago as a computer teacher, but in order to fill a gap she was assigned the portfolio of teaching Grade 7 maths and natural sciences, with the promise that she would be shifted to other subjects over time. The shift has never happened and she has stopped asking. She has grown to love those subjects and has shown her entrepreneurial spirit and can-do attitude through her continued work on the learner-support committee, the growth of the night school and through her efforts to keep a shadow of the extramural programme alive.



“Girl Guides are Happy!

Girl Guides are Happy!

Girl Guides are Happy Today!”

A rousing song-and-dance routine opens the afternoon session as girls dance in a circle, arms linked, in a space that has been opened up in Pertunia’s classroom at the end of the day.

Their foreheads shine with perspiration, but it is even hotter outside and the only tree on the grounds is near the toilet block, which nobody wants to be around in the heat of the day. Pertunia walks towards the door in mid-song and that’s enough to scatter the group of boys who have gathered to peer in to laugh at the girls.

“I was sobbing when we stopped Girl Guides,” Pertunia says of the time in 2016 when the extramural programme was grounded. “I was a girl once, and I like that we encourage girls to share their stories. We don’t talk about schoolwork here, so what we do here keeps me grounded in being myself.”

Earlier this year, she was at home on a Saturday afternoon when her phone started ping-ponging with messages and photos from her friend, Peliwe, the Girl Guides coordinator from a nearby school. It was 23 February, when Girl Guides (and Boy Scouts) all over the world commemorate the movement during ceremonies. “You know how they sit and stand and do things,” she says wistfully. “She sent me pictures of all these things and told me, ‘Hey, this could be you here today; you have to come back to Guiding!’”

Pertunia asked the school leadership and the other teachers. She was allowed to bring the activity of Girl Guides back to the school, and this singing and dancing is the result.

“I promise that I will do my best:

To do my duty to my God and my country;

To help other people; and

To keep the Guide Law.”

“Don’t look at the paper,” she admonishes the girls as, with three fingers raised in the Girl Guides salute, they try to recite the Promise without looking at the handout in front of them.

“Turn the paper over and recite it, remember it, say it again and then

again. If you can't recite the Promise and the Law and the Motto, you are not yet ready to be enrolled as a Girl Guide," she warns them. "You were not prepared when you arrived here today," she says, reminding them of the Girl Guide Motto: Be Prepared.

Next term, people from outside the school will come to enrol the girls. "It's a big deal; the whole school will watch you being enrolled. And remember that Girl Guides are forever, it stays here," she indicates her heart with the palm of her hand, "so Be Prepared!"



There was no such movement as Girl Guides to offer Pertunia the guidance she needed as a little girl in KwaMashu, but her aunts became aware of the late-night happenings in the family kitchen and sent Pertunia to Clermont to live with her mother and stepfather.

"If I had stayed in KwaMashu, my life would have turned sour. But by the time I came to school here I had my ways. My mum knew my naughtiness, she knew my thoughts, she knew me inside and out. In KwaMashu I could do whatever I liked, but once I was with my mum, she knew the teachers, she knew my movements. I became a better person because my mum was monitoring. I straightened my ways.

"She was strict but loving as well," she says of her mother, reciting the recipe that has served as her approach to teaching. Also missing from the first few years of Pertunia's childhood was an adult who could watch over, guide and protect her. She knows how important it is for girls to be guided, and this, perhaps, is what draws her to the Girl Guides movement.

Pertunia found her feet when she moved in with her mom and describes her stepfather as "the best dad ever". Even when her mother would tell her there was no money for a school trip, Pertunia's stepfather would slip the money into her hand. "Here, don't tell your mom," he would say with a smile and a gentle pat of her head. With both parents working, it was a time of relative plenty for the girl who for so long had been punished for being without.

In Standard 8 (Grade 10) Pertunia was elected as the Chairperson of the nearby Gugulethu Youth Centre. "That's when my mum saw that I had leadership potential," she says, smiling at the memory. "It was a whole lot of fun."

Pertunia briefs the girls on how they will form their Girl Guides patrols and vote for their patrol leaders. Similarly, at the Gugulethu Youth Centre, the teenagers were encouraged to form teams. They were trained to work with the youth. They were taught to survey the young people in the area for information, they were linked with social workers and were trained to direct young people to community support structures.

“If we wanted to organise a fun run, they would give us water bottles and organise transport; we went to youth camps and learned about all sorts of things – we watched movies about STDs that made us scared of sleeping around! It was fun, and at the same time, we learned a lot. That experience helped me now that I am a teacher.”

I would imagine it also helped her as the mother to two girls. Her eight-year-old daughter attends a church school close to home. Her 21-year-old daughter has put her teaching studies at UKZN on hold after being badly injured during the #FeesMustFall protests there. The scars from that day are beyond the physical, and fear and anxiety have prevented her from returning.

Pertunia never aspired to be a teacher. She appears wedded to her identity as a “naughty” student, and never thought she would be suited to the school environment. When she wasn’t accepted at nursing school, her friend brought her the forms to apply at a teachers’ college, and by chance, her course was set.

“The word of God is everything to me. It keeps me grounded and gives me purpose. I believe I was placed in this profession and that it is God’s purpose that I am here.” She believes she is well placed to help children who need a caring adult to look out for them. She understands the risk of a child left untethered in the currents of a world that is often indifferent to her interests.

“When I look back at what happened to me and what God has done, it makes sense. I was like a seed that was growing; there were people around me, but they couldn’t help me, they couldn’t pour water on me so I could grow. Only God did that, and that is why I am here today.

*“He wanted me to deal with the misbehaving,  
unruly kids, the ones that need love, those who don’t have warmth  
in their families.”*



As I leave the school I look out into the expanse of distance afforded by the geography of the area. I see a highway with its trucks and cars and taxis making their slow way into the haze beyond this place. I see countless houses and schools and other buildings attached to the wooded slopes of hills. I think of all the dramas and tragedies and victories playing out right now within each of these spaces.

I would like to imagine that at this moment a local politician in a blue suit is making his way along the winding roads to address the adults of the school so that people like Pertunia Luthuli can be better equipped to do their work. He might even paraphrase the words of former US President George HW Bush in his inaugural address to Congress: “The [KwaDukuza] people await action. They didn’t send us here to bicker. They ask us to rise above the merely partisan.” (1989)

But this is just one school perched on one hillside in The Valley of a Thousand Hills. Government officials are hard at work to retain their ground in what is being touted as the most hotly contested election in South Africa’s democratic history – a mere six weeks away.

The troubles at Mcopheli Primary School will have to wait.

Thankfully Pertunia Luthuli, and people like her all over the country, carry on with their work regardless.

“I would like to see other people who are passionate like me,” Pertunia says. “I am not saying that I am the best, but I feel like I cultivate things in learners. I like to help people see what is the best in them, to help them to cultivate the good within themselves, to know who they are and to do better.” Pertunia likes to picture herself as a heart. “I am an enthusiast! I am an active person!” But not just any heart. “It is a big, big heart. A heart that has energy, a heart that is pumping!”