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‘Helping a child heals me’ - Port Elizabeth's Gladys Panda

Mama Gladys has opened her home to abandoned kids – and says doing so makes her forget her tough past

By Naziziphiwo Buso - 09 August 2019



Gladys Panda, of Coega Door of Hope, is looking after 30 needy kids
Image: Fredlin Adriaan

As I walk through the gate at a Sydenham home, a group of children playing soccer halt their game to greet me and ask if I am looking for “uMama”.

Before I respond, still mesmerised by the good manners they display for a stranger, a spunky girl leads me through the house where some children are chatting loudly while others watch television in a granny flat at the back of the property.

I catch a glimpse of the kitchen counter, covered with more than 30 dishes filled with a hearty serving of savoury samp and beans, and am reminded of why I’m visiting Gladys “Mama Gladys” Panda of Coega Door of Hope.

Panda opened her two-bedroomed Motherwell house to abandoned and orphaned children in 1998 without any funds but only a vision from God.

She now accommodates 30 children at her Sydenham home, where they are provided with food, clothing, shelter and school fees for schools around the area.

As we talk about where her need to care for children came from, the soon-to-be 70-year-old casually cradles a baby.

“I decided to open up my home for children in April of 1998 after a vision made clear to me why I would find difficulty sleeping when I saw a hungry or shabby child.

“In the vision I saw a toddler digging in a bin near NU8 SPAR and a voice spoke to me.

“The voice said: ‘I want you to go out there and take all the children that suffered the same plight you suffered as a child and raise them for me’.”

A week later, Panda, with the help of a colleague at Luthando Luvuyo Special School, where she worked as a clerk, formed a constitution for her non-profit organisation.

Days after she formally registered the organisation, a six-month-old abandoned baby was dropped off at her home.

The next day an eight-month-old baby found at Kwa Ndokwenza was also dropped off at her house.

On the third day, a young girl dropped off her 10-day-old baby, whom she had not named, at Panda’s doorstep.

Panda says this baby, whom she named Luvolwenkosi (God’s opinion), confirmed her vision, and her true calling.

However, not all has been peachy for Panda – she has been homeless and at times has had to be resilient in the face of challenges.

“In 2002, I then partnered with another organisation from Theescombe and at that time my organisation was called Mothers’ Ark.

“Those seven years were tough but I remembered why I had started.

“And in 2009 I left that partnership and then I became homeless with the children.

“We would sleep at different locations with no sponsorship,” she said.

“One day as I was walking up Prince Alfred Street, I spotted a flat on rental for R3,400.

“I paid the deposit with the payout that I had received from splitting from the organisation from Theescombe.

“We lived there for months until God provided a miracle and we managed to get funding for a house bond from the bank despite me not having an income,” she says.

Panda says she managed to survive with her 30 children on a R9,000 sponsorship, with the house costing them R4,500 a month.

“Through God’s miracles and prayer we have had enough and people come into our lives at junctures where I have needed them.

“After hearing our plight, an American church paid the house bond in just three months,” she said.

Panda says her greatest achievement is not seeing one of her children graduate or get a job – it is that she saves lives.

“Everything that has happened in my life has had a purpose,” she said.

“For me to work at a special school before was grooming me to be patient in looking after my children and to understand that they are all different and have different learning capabilities.”

Asked why she still does what she does, Panda says: “Whenever I help a child it is like medicine that heals me of the past that I experienced.”

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