

HELENNE ULSTER

HIGHER LEARNER

PLAY visits Helenne Ulster at the haven of learning she has established in the heart of Yeoville

Text: Colleen Lewis Image: Cindy Otis

Helenne Ulster has an aura of gold around her. She glows with so much warmth and life that it seems that she can spread magic with the touch of her hand. She has a rich, melodious voice to match - small wonder that she is a successful jazz singer who has sung with most of South Africa's top jazz musicians and also hosts a jazz programme on Radio Today.

But to see Helenne's true magic at work, you need to visit United Church School (UCS) in Yeoville. Here, squeezed between run-down homes and shabby spaza shops, are the inauspicious but clean and freshly-painted premises of arguably Gauteng's most successful independent non-profit school.

"I always knew I was going to become a school teacher - growing up in a family of teachers, I didn't realise I had a choice," Helenne laughs. "When I was a teenager I used to sing in a band, and at 13 I wanted to drop out and become a pop star. But my father was a school principal, so he very quickly put an end to that idea ... and now I've ended up as a school principal myself!"

Helenne was one of the founders of UCS 21 years ago. Her co-founders have since retired but she has stayed on to run both the primary and the high school sections, providing a quality education to more than 500 children from disadvantaged inner-city communities. On the grimy streets of Yeoville teeming with the unemployed and the marginalised, the UCS learners are an inspiration in their neat uniforms, ties and blazers; girls with smartly braided hair, the boys clean-cut and confident.

Helenne has instilled back-to-basics punctuality, good manners, regular attendance and accountability. As the head of an independent school, she can choose the teachers she wants and demands high standards and full commitment. She can also make sound business decisions and UCS must be the only donor-funded school in Johannesburg to have a funding reserve that is invested in the money market.

The humble and cramped classrooms of UCS are filled with love, joy and bright colours. The walls are covered with photos, children's drawings and motivational phrases. Children sing, dance and perform. Music and art are on the curriculum, along with maths, science and computer studies. An advanced foundation phase teaching methodology developed in the US has been introduced in the primary school. The school employs a full time social worker and has active HIV/Aids and drug awareness programmes.

Despite the many difficulties that these children face in their young lives, the school has a 100% matric pass rate and some have gone on to study medicine, engineering and even actuarial science. Weekly assemblies are a platform for learners to speak and perform. And when Miss Ulster addresses the school, the kids cheer as if she is indeed the pop star that she dreamed of becoming.

It's the kind of school that gives abundant hope for the future. We need thousands more such schools in South Africa. If only there was a way to clone wonder woman Helenne Ulster.
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WONDERWOMEN



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Makeup Xxx
Xxxx