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SATURDAY PROFILE

Helping Soweto Youths Make the Music of Their Lives

OTTO POHL

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SOWETO, South Africa — Although the immediacy has dulled after 10 years of working in this South African township, there are little moments when Rosemary Nalden is reminded of the desperation around her.

"I saw a student of mine eating a lemon I had picked earlier in my garden," she recalled in a recent interview. "I said, 'Why are you doing that?' 'Because I'm hungry,' he said."

She paused. "You forget."

Ms. Nalden, a 59-year-old transplanted musician from Britain, has had enormous success providing opportunity in her adopted home, but those around her still learn the hard lessons of life in Soweto. When the world gives you lemons, eat them.

Ms. Nalden founded and directs the Buskaid Soweto String Project, an ensemble of string players made up exclusively of young men and women from the township. Although few of them played an instrument before they joined, Ms. Nalden has built and trained the group to where they now play sold-out concerts in South Africa and around the world.

They have played for the former president, Nelson Mandela, and the queen of England. They have released a series of CD's, played under the direction of the renowned conductor Sir John Eliot Gardiner, and received the support of Gillian Anderson, a star of the television show "The X-Files."

The talent and lively style of the String Project have made it a growing musical force in Soweto, still one of South Africa's most impoverished and perilous places, and it is winning Ms. Nalden accolades worldwide.

For its members, however, the String Project is about much more than music. It is a place where they learn, often for the first time, about responsibility, teamwork and money.

"We are equipping them for something much greater than playing a stringed instrument," Ms. Nalden said, standing outside her one-story brick school as the sounds of violin practice rose above the street noise.

"The project changes them, focuses them," she said. "We keep them so damn busy that when they make that choice they have to deny the other side of life. There's no time to go out and do drugs."

Ms. Nalden's involvement began when she heard a report on the BBC 10 years ago about a small string school in Soweto that was going through hard times. A violist in London at the time, Ms. Nalden rallied her friends to raise money for the school by playing for money in London's railway stations. One hundred and twenty of her friends joined in, and in two hours their busking raised more than \$6,000.

She thought she would just deliver the money to the school and then forget about it. But when she arrived, she realized how much there was to do. The school was being mismanaged, so she founded a new group in a room at a township church.

After a few years of commuting between London and Soweto, she quit her orchestra career in London and moved to South Africa full time. The String Project was officially started in 1997.



Otto Pohl for The New York Times
"After years of sitting in a viola section, there was something in me that needed to be the boss."
ROSEMARY NALDEN

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"After years of sitting in a viola section, there was something in me that needed to be the boss," Ms. Nalden said.

It began with 15 students. Now there are more than 80. "They kept turning up, and I kept not being able to say no," Ms. Nalden said. She has had to learn, however. Close to 2,000 students have applied, and her school is at capacity, its three teachers and seven student-teachers already doing all they can do.

For the students that are accepted, most of them ages 9 to 23, Ms. Nalden's school has become a lifeline in an often senseless world. For Ms. Nalden, the line between teacher and aid worker is often blurred.

"I get too involved, but I can't help it," she said, her voice excited and impassioned. "I don't see how you can run a project like this and not get involved. People say I'm too soft. I'm not, really, I'm quite hard. But I want to know the context. I know that one girl was raped by her uncle. She told me that on her first day."

In an effort to be matter-of-fact, she added, "She's 12."

Three parents of students have been murdered, a student has been stabbed on his way home from school, and another saw his friend shot to death on the school playground.

In 1999, private donations and corporate support allowed her to build her own school on the grounds of a church. Within the white walls is a well-lighted universe where students can escape into the world of classical music.

In many ways, Ms. Nalden's life parallels that of her father, who in the 1960's founded the first practicing conservatory in New Zealand, where he moved the family from Britain.

Still, this is rebellion. He wanted her to become an academic.

"I think I'm doing this because he didn't want me to do this," she said. "But what I inherited was a terrierlike obstinacy."

As obstinate as she has been to overcome the bureaucratic, social and financial hurdles of working in the township, Ms. Nalden turns motherly and soft in the practice room. She listens with dedication and fusses with concern when the children play a new piece.

The sense of mothering is not accidental.

"I never had children," said Ms. Nalden, who never married. "I think that this is part of what this is about." She without children has come to those without childhood.

Many of the students have flourished under her tutelage, and two have already gone on to study abroad. The Buskaid Trust has taken a lead role in financing their studies. Buskaid, in turn, is supported by a wide variety of South African organizations, including the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, the National Lottery Development Fund and Standard Bank.

Absorbed in the school, Ms. Nalden sometimes misses out on popular culture. Two years ago, she received a telephone call from an actress named Gillian Anderson.

"I thought, God, an actress! That's pretty useless as far as money is concerned," Ms. Nalden recalled. But when her colleagues explained who Ms. Anderson was, she developed the contact and the actress offered to support the string ensemble on their first American tour, to Los Angeles and New York. They have since returned to the United States, and played at a festival in New Haven in June.

Although their tours have led them to such countries as France, Holland and New Zealand, Ms. Nalden is dedicated to developing the local music scene.

"I think the future is townships," she said. "There is a huge warmth to this community and a great sense of optimism."

But the problems of that community sometimes overwhelm her on the drive home to nearby Johannesburg after a long day.

"We have this little haven where we worry about our upbows and our downbows," she said. "And out there, it's life and death."

She waved across the seemingly endless expanse of the township, blanketed under a pall of yellow dust. The sun was setting over the local hospital, an ambulance pulling in.

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