Helen Lieberman - An Amazing Woman, a Light Unto the Nation

- Friends. Good evening, everybody. Tonight, it is a real honour to introduce you to my friend and mentor, Helen. She represents the embodiment of light unto the nation, not only to me, but to others that have been positively impacted by her work. Helen Lieberman has changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people by mobilising individuals to better their communities. Her gifts of heart and mind have earned her gratitude from others worldwide.

Shocked by the poverty of South Africa during the worst years of Apartheid, Helen Lieberman founded Ikamva Labantu, "Future of the People," to offer Black South Africans access to education and social services. In the 1960s, Helen, while working as a white speech therapist at Cape Town's Groote Schuur Hospital, made a grim discovery when she decided to track down a baby who had not received adequate therapeutic remediation. She drove out of Cape Town to Langa township and found the baby living in a shack. The conditions were terrible. There was no clean water, no comfort. As she reflected years later, you didn't see into Langa from the M2, the road to Cape Town Airport, which was hidden by growth of thick trees and bushes, and probably designed that way.

To quote Helen, "I thought I was looking into what was hell. There was squalor, poverty, and fear all around, but the people's fear struck me. It was so overwhelming and terrible. I couldn't imagine this in my own country, and I knew that I could not live and watch it happening without trying to help. We each have to carry out our conscience. At least now, I can face myself, having tried to do something about it." That experience changed Helen's life. She's an extraordinary testament to the good that flows as vibrantly as a river in flood through so many parts of South Africa.

I first met Helen in 1982 when I moved to Cape Town, and I immersed myself, and have considered myself a part of the Ikamva family ever since. Wherever I go, I champion Helen and her unparalleled work. Helen's work is a... Helen's work is a unique life's work. She prefers to inspire others, to help them help themselves. Raising money is not the focus. Instead, she seeks to use it to train, to teach, and to help those less fortunate improve their life skills, thereby enhancing their ability to lead fulfilled lives. Today, Ikamva is a large organisation that's helped thousands of people in need in South Africa. It builds and supports creches, schools, senior and youth centres, programmes for the disabled, skills training and building initiatives. The organisation has also stepped up to help respond to the COVID crisis around the country. Through their networks, they've been able to react immediately and make a real difference on the ground. Helen's exceptional work has been recognised worldwide with awards, including the Order of Disa, Roger E. Joseph Prize, and the National Order of the Region of Honour from the French Nation. Helen, I'm so proud to be your friend. Over to you.

- Wow, thank you, Wendy. I think you've made my speech. Good evening, everybody. Wendy gave you the beginning, I will take over. So, as Wendy said, my first visit to Langa was a real rude awakening. I'd lived in Cape Town all my life, I'd read a lot what was in the newspapers,

there was no television in those days, and I'd heard on the radio that everybody lived happy lives in South Africa. And somehow, I was so politically unaware, through even my university days, that when I went into Langa, I was so shocked because it was such a rude awakening. I started by looking for and working with those that I had been working with at the hospital, 'cause none of my patients, in the short time I was at the hospital, had been, for me, sufficiently remediated.

But coming backwards and forwards, people saw the white woman who, after a while, couldn't take her car into the townships, crawling through the bushes, carrying parcels of food or whatever I could, and wondered who I was. A few people approached me to speak to me, some were friendly, some were very suspicious, and others were quite confrontational. But I think my shock and my... I was pretty scared. I was scared of what I was doing, but I couldn't stop. I knew that what I was doing might get me into trouble. But I woke up every morning, went to work at Groote Schuur, and couldn't wait just for the end of the day and to try to get into the townships. That compulsion has never stopped. I wake up every morning and I can't wait to get there. And you can imagine what lockdown has been like for me, sitting here in the comfort of my home, knowing I could do so much more out there.

Anyway, one or two people approached me and each mentioned a problem. Each mentioned what they'd like to see better. The first thing that struck me was nobody asked me for anything for themselves. Each person that came to me... And I'll give you the example. So one person came to me and she said, "I know that you are medical." And I said, "No, I'm not medical." And she said, "Well, then maybe you can help us. There are so many children, hundreds of children, there's nothing for the children. We can't go to work because we don't have passes." If you remember, they were the pass time. "Other people go to work and the children are just left around, "and we are so scared of the police, the police dogs, and the military." And it was really hard times then.

So I said to her, "What would you like to do?" And she said, "Maybe if we could look after the children." And I said, "If you want to do that, that's a good idea. How would you like to do it?" And we talked, and we talked, and from that moment I realised that I knew what she needed to do, I knew how she needed to do it, but something inside... I had never done development work and something told me to walk with her, and let her self-discover what needed to be done.

And so, we worked out that we would take the furniture out of her home, we would bring the children off the streets, then I would help her and show her how to manage children for the day. How to look at sleep time, story time, eating time, play time, exercise time. And so, the next day, I arrived, and it was on the weekend even because I couldn't... I was still working. I worked with her with a few children and we carried the furniture out, it was a very tiny shack, and we started our first daycare centre.

By this time, I was coming backwards and forwards, and I'd had a number of brushes with the police, and I was arrested. Not that my family knew anything about it, 'cause they let me out

after an hour or two, and one of my promises to my family was I could go to the townships but I'd never get into trouble and nothing would happen. So they didn't need to know. But the funny part of the arrest was that I was never allowed in the same police van as the person I was arrested with. I had to wait for the Wit Van. A

nd so, I had to stand outside, and the mama would sit in the van, and I would fight to get into the black van with her. And eventually, the white van would arrive and they'd sort of drive me around, and they'd either put me in a room for an hour or two. They afterwards built the , which they've recently demolished, in Langa. And that was the beginning. And eventually, the hospital heard about it 'cause I also took patients back to the hospital as they got discharged. And eventually, was dishonourably discharged, and I left the hospital. And that was the day that I had freedom, and I felt free to go back and spend the rest of my life, as I have, in the townships. So that started the early childhood development. It wasn't anything like... It was children confined in a very tiny space, very unsanitary.

There was no ablution facility. They used... I got as many little potties and we got buckets for water, for washing. And it was hell, it was terrible. It was dirty, it was smelly. There was hunger. But the biggest thing was the fear and the way that people were treated. And the more I got to know the people, the more I saw their resilience, their wisdom, their power, and their wish to help each other. And in the community that I came from, I didn't see that as much. Yes, in the Jewish community, we have amazing people that do help our people, but it wasn't the same type of neighbourliness and outreach.

That you always shared your pot; your pot was never just for your family. So from there, another mother wanted to start, and another wanted to start, and we developed a process of those that had no passes to become the early childhood people, and those who had passes could go out into the city, wherever, and find work. And so, the early childhood grew, and grew, and grew. It became countrywide. We were the first ever... We've always been thought leaders and been the innovators. We were the first people to open, in the black townships, any early childhood. And that went through throughout the country. In later years, it went into the rural areas, and I went all over with whoever was working with me on that project.

And eventually into Johannesburg, and other areas, Pretoria, Diepsloot, Soweto. And hundreds and th... And before we looked around, affiliated to us... There was no organisation, it was me and the people, and the mamas, and there were lots of men too, that just band together with an unbelievable ethic of... It wasn't service, it was living the life we should in South Africa. Living for ourselves, but more for each other. And understanding respect, understanding no matter how poor or unable you were to do something, you could be abled and you could be assisted and, in a respectful way, one could give you a chance to open the world to you, and that was how I morphed into that. I certainly didn't start that way.

But hearing, listening, watching, and being led, I must say that had I not been into the townships, I would not not have had a view of the world, or a view of humanity, as I do.

Everything that I do, think, and feel, I've learned, and I've learned it from the people that I work with. There's something that is magic about Africa and the African spirit. And I feel whole, and I feel fulfilled, because I've had the privilege and the opportunity to be able to imbibe that, to understand it, and to be able to make it my own. And I just... If I could pass it on to others, there's a degree of such satisfaction and such beauty to your life.

If we, in our living here, those of us in South Africa, could feel that Africanism, we need to gel more our feel in that. Anyway, after early childhood, which went... I cannot give you time. I must tell you that there's so much that happened, and so much ran into each other, and so many people started coming and talking to me, and giving me ideas, and asking for help, or telling me they would help me to do things, so I would like to run through the huge amount that happened in as short a time as possible.

You could be here till tomorrow morning, just by my telling you about how each thing happened, how somebody approached me, somebody told me, somebody asked me. Don't forget, there were no cell phones. Very few people had phones in the townships. We had one phone at home. I used to leave home early in the morning and come home 11 o'clock at night. And my poor family, especially Michael, they didn't know if I was alive or dead 'cause so many things happened. But it worked. It happened, people protected me. It was just amazing. So after early childhood, then I was... As the children were coming in, I saw there were many children with challenges.

Nobody even recognised they were children, it didn't matter, but I saw they needed specific care. They needed parents to understand their issues. They needed... They were physically disabled, mentally disabled. So we opened up different programmes and before I looked around, there were 14 of these in Cape Town and I started them other places in the country. People started coming day and night. People were coming to me from all over the country. Still, there was no Ikamva Labantu, it was just myself and the band of amazing people. And then, one day, we had to take...

We had to start understanding how big this was getting, and we had to understand that we needed to get together and talk through things. How could we do it? We didn't have a hall, we didn't have space, we weren't allowed to meet in groups. So we used to meet in the fields. We used to find places that were far out, we used to walk quite a far time and bring groups together, and that was the beginning of what we called "forums." So we started an early childhood forum called "Ithemba Labantwana."

Problem is it grew bigger and bigger, and before we looked around, we had 1,000 people countrywide that were part of Ithemba. That's 1,000 preschools. Nobody was given anything. There was no funding, there was no support, but it happened. People just did it, people created. We took waste, we drew in the sand, we... There was a spirit of giving, and doing, and creating, and participating. There was an excitement, and that excitement was fueled by a lot of what the police did to us. The cruelty at times was beyond. They would just take a mother, newborn

babies lying in a shack, they would arrest her and leave the children alone, no water, no nothing. They'd take the woman away, leaving the children alone. The trauma of that woman and the hell with the children, the fear. And they were cruel, they were bad. Anyway, I got into trouble a couple of times for challenging that, and I don't know if I did any good for the mamas that were... So I'll continue.

The next thing that happened is that I was approached by lots of people saying we need to earn. "We need to earn. We need to... We have no money. We need to do something." We learned, and I want to follow this one day again, to create our own internal economy. So we opened sewing groups, bread baking, a little bit of shack fixing and house fixing. Funny story with shacks... With bread baking. So we got into trouble for bread baking because the law was, in job reservation, that black people could bake bread but black people couldn't sell bread. Coloured people could bake bread and sell it. So we were baking bread for sale, for our own eating and for selling.

So what we did was we found distant places, 'cause there were many distant places, there were many fields, many trees, we dug holes in the ground, we took bricks, we made coal, and we started the pot bread. And you know, pot bread is just everywhere. Started baking in pots until, of course, we were found again. But there was innovation everywhere, which is still there today. The next thing that happened, so disabled centres, and I spent a lot of time educating parents on what was... Nobody knew what was wrong with their child. Nobody knew how to treat their child, how to assist their child. They didn't know how to comfort them, how to best massage, and seek their child and feed their child. There was nothing for them and there was so many of these kids. So I trained the teachers and I trained the mamas.

And afterwards, let me tell you, they trained me because they found more innovative ways. They were absolutely wonderful. They were devoted. It was a messy business, these children were messy. We had nothing. We tore up sh... I tore up all my sheets, all my tiles. We did anything to get this going. From then is a wonderful story. So I'm running around the townships now, I'm trying to do as much as possible, reach as many people. I'm out of Langa, I'm in Gugulethu, I'm in beginning of Crossroads, I'm in Athlone, I'm working in the mosques. I was working with the... I used to cover my head and wear long sleeves and take off my shoes, and the sheikh let me... The imam let me go into the back room and work with mothers of disabled children, educating them, showing them.

So I'm busy all over the place and I don't stop to think, I just propel myself, and suddenly there's a woman and she's standing right in front of me. Not as a person stands in front, but actually on top of me. Very stern face. Looks me in the eye and says, "What are you doing here?" And I was really scared. I didn't know what to say. I said, "Well, I'm trying to work with people." She said, "What? "What are you doing?" So I said, "I'm busy with the children "and I'm busy with disabled children. "I've got skills development centres, bricklaying places." And I started... "I got leather work, "shoe making, shoe repair, "disabled factories with curtains."

By then, I was way... Doing just 100... There wasn't a moment in the day, I... So she said, "Oh, and what about old people?" I hadn't thought of old people. I hadn't seen an old person, I hadn't thought of them. So she said, "And why are you doing it?" And I said, "I don't know why." So she said, "Well," she said, "I just want to tell you one thing "that if you come in here "and you want to help people, "and then somebody might disappoint you "and you've put a sewing machine in some place, "or you've given some children some books, "and you think we are not good enough "and you want to take back what you've given," she said, "then leave now. "We don't want you here."

And it took my breath away. I said, "Why are you saying this to me?" She said, "Well, that's been my experience. "There've been a lot of white people "that have come to me "and they've wanted to help me. "And as soon as things haven't gone their way, they go. "And they disempower you, "they take their things "and they treat you badly. "And unless you can treat us with respect, "and unless you can see us for who we are..." She was my teacher, she is my darling, she is somebody that I absolutely adore. Her name is Tutu Gcememe. So on that day, she made me drop what I was doing. She was really... I was so scared.

She was really cheeky. She got in the car with me and she said, "Come, I want to show you what you should be doing." So off we went to a shack and no words can describe what I saw. There was an old woman, semi-blind, she could see a little bit, and she was catheterized. And there were two little children, lovely little children, and they kept pulling on her catheter and the screams of pain from that woman, it was terrible. The squalor in that place, the smell, it was horrible. And she kept me there for a while.

She said, "Come, I want to show you something else." She took me to a couple of others, and by the time she'd finished, I was in... I couldn't breathe. I felt so... I felt so terrible, really. And I looked at it and I said, "Will you allow me to help you?" She said, "That's why I came to you." And from the next day, I started working with Tutu. There was nothing that was too much for me to do in support of Tutu. She led it. I didn't do it. She opened 22 senior centres. It took a long time. The first lady that helped her was a real hero. We still have her daughter, who's a hero, with us. Mama Dukashi had a daughter, Phumla. Phumla joined us later. But Mama Dukashi and Tutu started opening... We opened our first senior centre in Mama Dukashi's garage in New Crossroads.

We cleaned the place, we scrubbed it. Dogs had been kept there. And we started bringing the seniors in. They were hungry, many of them were infirm. And they were proud. They were culturally so rich. They knew who they were, they knew what they wanted. They were the magic that gave us everything that we have in Ikamva. The cultural richness, the beauty of Africa, the beauty of what it is to be an African. They taught us so much. And they still, today, stay and be as the rock to who Ikamva is. I'll go on to say where we are today with the seniors. But as Ikamva grew and more and more things joined us, they were the blind, which we eventually were the first people to open aromatherapy, they were...

We worked in the hospitals with the men, caged in for year after year, with the hell of what hospital life was. We became countrywide, going all over the country. Then, we realised we needed buildings. There was nothing. And luckily, Rotary helped a bit, but I was able to bring in the funding, and Germany helped a bit on that, and we were able to build. We built 100 small preschools, and that was huge because 100 is a lot of buildings. And then, we started building multipurpose centres and centres. We were given support. And that's where, I must say, I never have gone to ask for things. I feel my madness doesn't have to be your madness, but those that have helped me over the years, I can never thank enough.

They've been amazing people, and it's hard to hold back on the Wendys and the Ruperts and the others that have come in. They have been there from day one. We could never have built Ikamva without them and so many others. I feel bad. I could sit all evening and tell you how amazing not only the people in the townships, but those that come to help support us. I think they've come to support us because if you come into the aura of Ikamva and you understand the level of our true dedication to what we are doing and the integrity around it, the respect and the understanding of how people sacrifice for each other, and nobody wants any accolade. And I know I'm digressing, but I just want to say this.

I have had many acknowledgements, I've accepted them as graciously as I can, but no organisation, no entity that approaches 100th of what Ikamva Labantu is today can be done by one person. The amount of people that have sacrificed their lives and put in what they have to this organisation is unbelievable, and it's all been done with an absolute honesty. The staff building it to this point, the staff of today, are quite amazing. So I'm doing this talk in salute and tribute to the many years that people have stood up at my side.

And I feel that it's very wrong that I get the acknowledgement. So onto how we run the place, how it's done, and all the hundreds of programmes, and I'll go through what we do today. But how we do it is we own nothing. Every single bit of what happens is on direction, on request, and in discussion as to how we should do it, who should do it, what is needed, how to start, and then we follow. And every area of we work is governed by the people themselves. So early childhood has their own forums, their own committees. They make decisions and we follow. They need skills enhancement, right?

So we worked... There's background noise, I don't know if you're aware of that. Somebody's not muted. So in the year... So we have special forums for the seniors called Ilizwi Labadala, which means "The voice of the seniors." So the 22 clubs are governed by the seniors. We provide the services as to their volition. We work behind them and beside them, they govern. If we have a problem, it goes to the governing committee of Ilizwi Labadala. If I want to go and visit a senior centre, I ask permission, I don't walk in.

We may have built the buildings, we may have been giving them the financial support, but they own it, it's theirs. They come there daily, leaving places where they're really living in terrible conditions. They have beautiful places. My mantra is, "If it's not good enough for me, it's not

good enough for anyone else." So each building... And we are busy upgrading, that every building for seniors will have their own hot showers and toilets... They have toilets, but hot showers and change of clothing. And they get fetched and taken, they design their own meals, they get the allowances that we can afford, they do their own governance, they see to their own order of the day, their exercises, their skills that they... They control the money that they might make... Of things that they might make.

And it is quite amazing, the pride, the sense of ownership, and the happiness. You walk into a club and there's such happiness. And I always feed into that happiness because I've been to many other old age homes and I don't see that spirit; that spirit of ownership and happiness. Sometimes, they're very cheeky and they let you know where you are, and it's just such a wonderful feeling to know that people that have been the bottom of the barrel and been in other people's services, and often not treated nicely, now have been given their voice, have been given their power, have been able to tell you "We don't like that. "This is how it should be done." And when there's a problem, the governing body of Ilizwi Labadala... And they are some force. We take our problems sometimes... I'll tell you the one story 'cause it sounds very nice.

So there was an old lady sitting... She had her seat every day in the one centre, and next to her was a very nice old man. That old man had aged tremendously. I don't think he even knew that he was sitting next to her. Anyway, she was away for three, four days, and another old lady took her seat. And when she came back, there was a terrible, terrible row because the old lady felt that the new lady had encroached on her possession. And so, we didn't know how to handle these two old ladies, so we took her to the Ilizwi Labadala. That's some of the stuff that happens. They sorted them both out 'cause they had the wisdom and know how to handle within their culture. So that's just a little side one.

So we grew and we grew and we went countrywide, and there there were many learnings, many partnerships. We believe strongly in partnerships with partners that understand the rules of the game. That understand, first of all, the deep respect and the deep understanding of how you behave when you work in development, how you understand the privilege it is to work with people, and assist and grow with them and hear what they want. And even if you don't think it's as wise, you go. You go with people. You go with those that you are working with. So we have partnerships. We've been a very strong incubator. I'm often approached by young people who really want to do something.

They've got a marvellous idea, they're not from the townships. They could bring value to communities. And so, with the rules of the game, they're invited. And we are not going to mention all the organisations that we've incubated, but in many cases, they've done so well that they've even outstripped us. And I proudly, as a mother would, watch them grow and would like to see them in... And they've been amazing. So it's difficult to even keep tabs on all the agriculture, all the skills development, all the factories, the black dolls. 15,000 black dolls were brought to South Africa, we opened a black doll factory.

All the skills we taught and now people have their own small factories. We closed that factory for many, many reasons. And we realised, as we developed, that so much more needed to be done. We were lucky to have a lot of people who understood that I'm not so good at governance. In fact, I'm terrible. I'm not so good at being ordered, I'm terrible. I'm scatty, I'm all over the place. I get ideas, I'm bossy. If you speak to the staff, they'll tell you. I know we all love each other, but I'm one rough lady.

And so, it was necessary to get good governance in, to get good boards, to have amazing leadership. And we've reached a point now that I don't think we could have better leadership, we could have a better board. And especially our board of protectors, who are there to protect everything. They very diligent, they have strict boundaries and strict ways of governing us. And everything financial, everything within policies and strategies are... We do monitoring and evaluation of everything. We have good stats.

So altogether, it's an amazing organisation in a path that, really, I wouldn't even think of, 'cause all I think about is "What can we do more? "Where can we help more? "Where can we develop more? "Where can we mobilise more? "Where can we take lives "from place A to place B, "where they're in a better position?" So I'd like to tell you about some of what we have now, and then I'd also like to tell you about some of the amazing stories and things that have happened during my privileged 56 years. And it's been an unbelievable journey. It's been a journey of friendship and a journey of such affirmation, for others and for me. And it's been a world of wonder, tainted by an African... The wonder of Africa and who we are.

I never forget, the songs, and the sound, and the outreach, and the wisdom, and the down-to-earth management of themselves and their lives. Yes, there are lots of other nonsense. There's nowhere in the world that doesn't have violence and stuff happening as we see today. So where we are today, when we developed the early learning... The ECDs, as we call the early learnings, we tried many methods and we never got to a point where I could walk into a preschool and say, "That's where I'd like my grandchild." So we got together, a lot of us, and we did a lot of talking and thinking, and we came up with something that looked at experiential learning. And a lovely story of the fact that I had been able to buy, with family money and other money, a lot of land by a very corrupt man towards the end of the Apartheid government. He came to me and said, "If you have money, I have land."

I didn't know what I was going to do with the land, but I took money and I bought land. I bought good land, I bought Fifth Avenue land. I had no plans, I had no capacity. But I think my father bought land and I think I... He taught me a little, so I bought it. But at that point, you weren't allowed to... Black people weren't allowed to own land, so I put the land in the name of Ikamva Labantu. Oh, we hadn't... Some of it, we hadn't had... It wasn't Ikamva Labantu yet. I bought the land and I put it in the name of community development. I just need to tell you how Ikamva Labantu happened and how...

At that point, what had happened. After about 25 years, we were this huge, thousands and

thousands of people, all doing something countrywide. We were running all over the country in the rural areas, in Johannesburg, in Mossel Bay, George, Knysna, in Cradock, in just... , everywhere. We were all over. But there was no structure and it wasn't an organisation, it was people. Just people affiliated to working to a cause. And I was in Crossroads, working with a woman called Maggie Buqa. Two incidents happened with Maggie Buqa.

The one was that I was working with her and we were showing mothers... She was a fully trained nurse, and we were showing mothers of children who were disabled how to hold them, and clean them, and bath them. It was very difficult when a child is so stiff and little hands are so terrible, how to gently and position a child. We didn't see the police coming. We didn't see, and before we knew it, there were dogs, and police, and noise, and screaming, and Maggie and I were very badly treated. We were... They were physical with us, and we both all fled. And I came home, and I was home for a couple of days, very scared, very worried about others. And there was no phones, no cell phones.

And suddenly, outside my door, I was sitting in my front room and a black car arrived, and I thought, "Oh my God, "here I am, again in trouble." And a man came out, and with him came a couple of men with those things hanging from the ears, and I opened the door. And it wasn't the security police or anything, it was the German ambassador. And he came in, and he sat down, and he spoke to me, and he told me that, I wasn't aware of it but, the incident had been filmed and had been shown across Europe. And Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor, had got hold of the German ambassador here. They'd made investigation, and they came and they said that they would like to... We had never had funding, never been supported. How we managed all that we did to that point, I don't know but we did.

A bit of our family money and others came in but, I mean, it wasn't anything. And they said... He said that they'd like to support, but we should become an organisation. And the German government... And they would bring in the British government, and the Norwegian government, and the Australian government, that the ambassadors would come together and they would like to support. So I waited till it was okay for me to go back to the township, and I started speaking to everybody. And I tried to convince people, and they were...

I cannot tell you how I begged for it, and everybody said, "No, we don't want an organisation. We are free for the first time in our lives, we can do what we want to. What we have between all of us, as an association, is the freedom to do. We are not told where we can live, we're not told what we can eat, what we can bake, what we can sell, what we can sew. We can do what we like. Our lives are our own, we've got our own preschools, our own senior centres." We didn't have a lot then but we were well on our way.

Anyway, it took two years to ask. Went all over, I went all over the country, asking, begging. And one day, I was called by a whole load of community people, and I was told that they had decided to form an organisation. And it was in a little hall in the townships where I was told that they had decided on the name, and they told me the name and it was Ikamva Labantu. I froze. I thought,

"Ikamva Labantu? "Even I will not remember the name ever. "And how am I going to get overseas people "to remember the name? "Shouldn't we call it "Hope?" "Shouldn't we call it "Courage?" Shouldn't we call it "Us, The People?" ""We, The People?"" I kept quiet. They gave me the provisions. The first was that the ownership of Ikamva Labantu has to always be theirs, and so it has remained.

The next thing was that I could remain as the volunteer that I was, and I still am a volunteer , for as long as they would like me, and I would be told when I should leave. I'm waiting. I know it could happen, but anyway. And that it would be called 'Ikamva Labantu' because 'Ikamva Labantu' means "The Future of Our Nation," or "The Future of Our People." And they felt that they were the forerunners and they were the foundation. And I truly think that a lot of the things that they formed has made us the future of our nation, 'cause what we do, it really deals with the real issues in the right way because it reaches what people want and need.

So going back to the land. So I had these parcels of land, and some I had, some were still to come. And we knew, as a group, that we needed to do something better for early childhood, that it wasn't reaching. Everybody was training by now. I can mention 10, 20, 30 training programmes. Nothing got to where we needed to be. The mamas had never been to a preschool. They'd never seen our preschools out of the townships. They never... No matter how much we tried to explain, we gave example, we gave equipment, it didn't happen. So we formulated what today is Kwakhanya. I don't think there is anything like it in South Africa. What it is, is it's a place of learning, for experiencing and growing, for anybody dealing with early childhood development.

It is absolutely beautiful. It is spacious, it has a huge atrium, it has beautiful training room. More importantly, it has a model preschool. We cannot take in children that pay because we would be in competition to the early other early childhood development. We take in orphans or children that have been traumatised by rape or other terrible incidents. So we've got, I think, 76 or 78 children there at the moment. Each child has come in from a world, or is still living in a world, that's not so good. But if you see what comes in and you see what leaves, it's quite amazing. We have a wonderful trained staff, we've written our own learning programme, we partner with other organisations. The mamas come in.

What they learn in the lecture room, they observe through glass windows, what's happening in our model preschool. They then, in another day, come in and practise what they've learned in the lecture room in our model preschool with our children. And then, we have specially trained people that go back to their settings and turn around their school. So what leaves us, and it only takes one year, is a total transformed preschool 'cause they've experienced, they've seen, they've heard, they've learned, they've practised.

And it's done in a way that we give the principal, or the carer... We run two courses, one's for carers and one's for principals, all calibrated to age groups with a proper learning... It's huge, the learning programme. We give them full apparatus to go back to work with, to follow the model

that we've created. So it's really something. And we've won quite a lot of awards as the best learning programme in South Africa. We very seldom brag, you'll find very little... We've been very poor on marketing ourselves so I'm really doing this marketing bit here, you'll have to forgive me. So that's the one programme that, in pride, and...

If I can tell you the beautiful story of how it happened. So we really knew we needed to do this and we knew we needed to build something quite magnificent. We needed a lot of money and we barely had money to keep going. And so, one day I was sitting, I was working, and we had terrible offices at that point where you had to walk through... If you wanted to go to the loo, you had to walk through this office, around that corner, whatever. We took an old storeroom thing... I used a storeroom that didn't even have a window as my office. So I needed to go to the ladies and I walked, and I see a lady, sadly sitting... I'm over-talking, aren't I? I don't know if I... Anyway--

- [Carly] Helen, maybe if... It's Carly, hi. Maybe another five minutes and then I'll ask you a few questions from the group?

- [Helen] Okay.

- [Carly] Does that work?

- It works for me. So I see a lady sitting there and she says... I just would like to also go into what we do with seniors and Afternoon Angels quickly. And she's sitting there and I ask her, "Can I help you?" And she said, yes, she would like to see Helen Lieberman, but she's been told I'm too busy to see her. Something told me to take her into the townships and cancel. The long and the short story, she'd come from Holland. A friend of hers had passed away and left an estate. She'd been told to find the best place to invest in children of Africa. I told her what we wanted to do, and she was the one that was able to go back to the committee that was holding the money, and convince them to support us to build the school. So now, we were able to put this on... Put up this building.

The other thing is to tell you that in our senior centres, which are quite amazing, we realised were not sufficient. We realised that there were seniors everywhere that were in horrific conditions, rotting in their shacks, not being able to be cared for with health conditions or poverty. And so, we created Umelwaneni, which is "Neighbourhood Friends," where we have our community based workers going to door-to-door, knocking on doors, finding things that are indescribable. And we set up a whole process and programme to support them. We have hundreds of these people that have had relief that we brought medical care to, and changed their lives by finding carers for them, and helping families cope and changing the condition. So that's the seniors programme. It's a model programme, the government's looking at it. They haven't... They haven't committed. They give us a lot of praise but very little help.

They do help us but this is something that should really be done 'cause the condition of old

people is terrible. And then, the last is something in total praise, 'cause I'm talking too much, in total praise of... I spent a good time... When I decided to get to know a little bit more about what's happening out there, I spent times in the squatter camps just walking, meeting people, talking. And what came to me was the message of the danger of children with gangs and drugs. And sitting with mamas and talking in their shacks and talking to other groups, we brought together a group of mamas who called themselves "Afternoon Angels," who opened up their shacks and their homes, and take children in.

We've been able to get some funding to feed them and to care. It's not a place where we educate, 'cause our mamas aren't qualified to educate, but it's turned around the lives of thousands of children who have somewhere to go while their parents are at work, and very bad transport is unable to get them home in time. These children were usually in the streets 'cause mothers had to lock their homes, not give children the key.

Nobody at home, you had to hang in the street. Straight away, the danger of rape, or molesting, or drug. And so, now, we have this amazing organisation of Afternoon Angels. We have such a waiting list of other mothers, but everything, of course, is that we've got to supply with the ability mainly to feed and to do the other services, which are we do all ear testing, eye testing, health issues, see to children getting their ability to go to school, social workers attending to them. So this has become a huge programme as well. I could go on for another hour, but I think I've over-spoken, I haven't touched half of what we do. And I would've liked to have just told you two stories, one about... Two or three stories. If there's time, I will, if I'm allowed.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: Helen, thank you so much. So just a few questions and, hopefully, an opportunity for you to tell the stories. So I understand, obviously, that you didn't want your family to understand how difficult the situation was you found yourselves in in the townships. But could you just touch a little bit more on how you were able to get into the townships, but also how you escaped the riots. Did you have help from the community? How did you...

A: Well, I didn't have to be helped. I found my way. I went from one person to the next. There was always somebody to meet me. You have no idea of the protection and the care, and how people took ownership of me, and my life, and what they did for me. I didn't do as much for them as how much was done for me in every way.

The one story I want to tell you of protection was of something unbelievable that a young boy did for me. He saved my life during a riot. Usually, the riots, I was... I dunno how, but messages got through to me. "Don't come in today. "This isn't safe. "That isn't safe." I always knew what was going on. I kept out of it. And if I can tell you, quickly, the story of saving my life, then you'll understand the lengths that people went to.

There was a huge march to parliament by the children who were told that they had to pay to

write their matrics. Barely did they have bread, but they had to pay. And there were a whole load of restriction about children and payment for their education. This was during Apartheid. This was a huge march, thousands of students marched to parliament. They stood for hours outside parliament. Not one person came to take their memorandum that they had brought of their... Of what they wanted to present. And so, the riot was over.

The next day, I was phoned to say, "Everything's all right. "You can come to the certain old age centre." So I did. I drove my car. And I didn't have the best car with the best air conditioning, I had an ordinary little old car. And I drove in, and I went to do my work in this senior club. And I come out, and I'm getting into the car, and I'm shutting the door. And I look up and in front of me, I see the ground moving, and I hear the thuds, and the thuds, and the noise. And I can see hundreds of children, hundreds.

And I look at the back of me, and I see more people. And I look on the side, and there's no escaping. And I know, I've been warned that one day, "This is going to happen to you. "You're mad! "You're mad for what you're doing." And I sat, and I rolled up the window, and it was boiling hot. And I thought, "Right, I'll take my... "Whatever's going to happen." And out of nowhere, a young boy who I would've... Nobody would look at 'cause he wasn't very good looking, he was more Rasta-looking than anything, banged on my window. And he said, "Roll it down," and I was scared, but I did, and he said... He used my Xhosa name, he said, "Nokwakha, what are you doing here?"

And I said, "Well, I was told everything was all right." He said, "No, they're going back to parliament." I said, "What am I going to do?" He said, "No problem." It was boiling hot. He had no shoes. He stood on the roof of my boiling car and as the children approached, he screamed and shouted, there was a hush, it was like a movie, and he told them who I was and what I was doing. And they danced around the car. The one made me open my window and handed me the lollipop sucker that she was sucking, wanting to share it with me. And they sang, and they danced, and they went on their way.

And when they'd gone, I barely had breath. I cannot tell you... I had nothing left in me from fear and from understanding what had just happened. And I said to this young man, "Who are you? "You risked your life there." And I said, "And how do you know my name?" He said, "I have nothing. "I have no parents. "You've fed me. "You've left instructions here that every day, "that a few of us in the streets..." I hadn't even remembered that I left instructions that they could feed and they could sleep on the stoop 'cause they had nowhere to sleep, I didn't want them out in the cold, and my mamas should give them blankets every night.

And so, I developed a relationship with this young man, who's brilliant, beautiful young man, Andile. And he eventually went back to school. He had a grandmother who was very poor and, I think, at that stage, she already had Alzheimer's, but I didn't understand it and it was a difficult time. And he became an accountant, a proper chartered accountant, from a Rasta. He was brilliant, beautiful, wonderful. He's somewhere in Johannesburg in a bank. I lose touch with all

these amazing young men and women. Michael and I are rich in having hundreds of children that we can boast about, especially our three but the others as well. So Andile is somewhere as an accountant, doing his thing. He saved my life.

Q: Wow, Helen. I mean, your stories really give us the opportunity to feel like we are there with you. In terms of some of your other success stories, I've heard from you before about your alumni. And especially in light of COVID, I know you've been using your unbelievable networks to be able to reach people across South Africa. Could you just tell the group a little bit more about the COVID work?

A: Right, let me tell you that I wa... As you know, I could talk for hours, but the Ikamva staff, the 120 of them, the leadership of them, it's unbelievable to even... To put into words what has happened. We started long before lockdown because we saw the writing on the wall. The leadership that made that decision wasn't mine. It was the leadership of the management. That we took 120 people, we stopped their jobs, we closed all our centres, and we asked them... We didn't have to ask them. They rallied around.

There's an army of 120 people doing work that probably 500 people would do. They're working from morning to night. We have to thank the Kirsch Foundation, you've given us an enormous amount of money, and others have too, Scheinberg, Rupert, I cannot tell you how... And hundreds of others have rallied around to give us the muscle to be feeding over 100,000. We're ramping up to 150,000 now. We were on 130, and we're ramping up to 150,000 people. The food parcels, the neighbourhood feeding spots, they're the most powerful that people are now in neighbourhoods, feeding their streets, their areas.

The neighbourhood nodes where we take other people's food and feed, the sanitization that's going on, the education of children in lockdown, the unregistered preschools that have nothing. The teachers have nothing, all the teachers and the helpers. The 8,000 children that have got meals. The other children that would be at our early childhood centre. The hundreds of seniors, the Afternoon Angels, the Afternoon Angels' mothers, hundreds of thousands. The countrywide that we feeding in Joburg, feeding in Craddock, feeding in Ashton, feeding in rural areas all over. It's just spread, people have just stood up. And everything is monitored. We've got monitors and we have people who are compromised.

They're phoning the seniors, all that... There's a phone chain going on there, WhatsApp groups going on. We are checking on everybody. It's an army of amazing, amazing initiative, people, energy, respect, and caring, and I salute them. I just feel I'm behind, screaming and shouting, only detracting from everybody's success because I come up with nonsense daily. The amount of masks, the amount of sanitising equipment... We are making masks.

Those that can't, we are making our own masks. Spray bottles. Everything is perfect. We've gotten... Everybody's getting temperature taken. Food is being... Every parcel is being sanitised. All the taxis. The taxi services that we've used during the year, we've kept... Everybody gets

fetched and taken safely. Those taxis, we've kept them on. We using the little minimal funds we have for running costs to pay them so that everybody, all our staff, gets brought in and out by taxis, our own sanitised taxis, to keep them COVID free. It's huge. Day and night. I've never worked so hard and I know my staff has never worked so hard, so it's a real operation.

But I want to say we are already working from relief to recovery. There's huge work being done in already setting up, "What are we going to do after COVID?" And we have a huge plan, and I know it's the right thing because it's consultative, it's working with communities who know what they need, who know how they need to do it. So although we are going to feed till we need to, we will be ready the next day, as we were to feed, to carry on, to start the new initiative.

Q:Thank you, Helen. I wanted to turn to one of your future projects. I know you've been working with Thomas Heatherwick and I was hoping you could tell us a little bit more about that project and what your imagination is for it.

A: Well... There's so much... There's so much that needs to be... We need to take the townships out of the townships. We need to bring a different thinking into what is offered to people living in the townships. Why must they have ugly brick buildings that are dank? Why can't they have beautiful buildings? Why can't they live in beautiful spaces? Why can't their needs be serviced with something that they can be part of designing that is world class?

So we still... Now, with COVID, we might have to change a lot because we had one idea, but I think we were in consultation last week with the leadership of Thomas Heatherwick's project. So they might have to be changed, but it's all around health and education, and opportunity of giving people the pride of knowing how much they're valued by putting something beautiful, something that gives them an understanding of their value.

So it's very hard to say till we've really made up our mind. We had one thought in mind. COVID has changed a lot of thinking, it's changed the world. We'd like to give a space for people who are from the township of Langa to beautiful office space where they can work. They don't have to go out of the townships to be accredited as lawyers, as doctors, as... They should have rooms that people feel lovely coming into, should be well run, respectfully. There's just so much that we are all trying to work out now that I don't want to commit, I just want to say we are so honoured to have The Waterfront and the other participants, who The Waterfront and Thomas Heatherwick have brought into a tiny organisation like Ikamva.

We feel so affirmed, and they work with us in such a respectful and such an encouraging manner. We thank them. And let's work it out. We've harnessed a school next door to try and see if we can expand on the land we need. The principal is over the moon, what a beautiful man. And we're looking to give the school some benefit as well. So maybe watch this space and we'll able to tell you when we've worked... When COVID's come more to the end and we can work out what's really needed. I think the world is changing. We need to service what is needed.

Q: Helen, in terms of the people who live in the townships and go to work, either in the cities or in Cape Town, could you describe a little bit about the journey that they have to go through and how the economics works?

A: May I talk about just my own lady who works for me a few days a week? Her name's Vuyo, absolute darling. So she lives in Khayelitsha. I sometimes would like to see her before I go to work, and that's horrible, but she can't do enough to please me. So we work it out that maybe, once in two weeks or once... That I can see her 'cause I'd like to leave by 7:30, quarter past seven. So she has to leave by quarter past seven... She has to be at me by quarter past seven. She's up at four. She's getting her household together, and many others who have children have to get their household together.

She has to walk a long way where it's not safe to get to a taxi rank 'cause her house is not on the main drag. Then she gets her taxi to near... She has to wait till the taxi fills up. Then she has to get the Nyanga station, where there is a changeover 'cause there's territory. Then, she has to wait there in a long line, 'cause they're long lines, and then she gets the taxi and lucky if she gets to me. She's exhausted, and I expect her to clean my home. I often watch here, outside, how people trudge up our hills and think the taxi system is terrible, the transport system is terrible. The lives they live... Many people live in houses with no ablution facilities. They have the children, it's dangerous. Life is hard. Life is very hard. And life was hard.

And one of the things to remember is the beauty of the nature of many people who've forgiven a lot of what's happened to them. A lot of them have hung onto it. But in the main, when one speaks to people who live in those conditions, one is often quite taken aback by the beauty of your exchange with them. I don't know if I wouldn't have... If I would address people in a different way as to which I am addressed sometimes by people that I just stop and talk to.

Q: Helen, I'm going to jump in now and just say it's almost... I've known you now for over 30 years. During Apartheid and post-Apartheid, I have been with you. Unfortunately, I didn't... I left South Africa, but then I've come back, I've come with you into the townships. I've seen the poverty, I've seen the squalor, I've watched what you've done over the past 30 years. The mamas, the children, the elders, the hope, the love. I just want to thank you for the most inspirational talk. I am so proud of what you've achieved.

You have been the mother to so many organisations here in South Africa. You've been an inspiration to them and an inspiration to... And you shine your light wherever you go. And I have to say that it's women like you that make me so proud to be a fellow South African. I love your organisation, your staff, what you do, and I just want to thank you very, very much for sharing your story with us. I wish you had more time for you to have told them how you used to park your car, crawl in through the thick bush, into the townships, how you'd have people waiting for you, how you'd go quietly at night with no street lights, how they would smuggle you into different homes and then smuggle you out, how your wonderful husband would be waiting for you, waiting to pick you up, how you sold your jewellery to raise money.

The stories are endless and I never get tired of listening to them. I can hear them over and over again. I have lived through this... I've lived through this and when we left South Africa, I was heartbroken. I was heartbroken not to continue walking this beautiful walk that you have walked, and I salute you. On behalf of all of us, I congratulate you, I salute you, and I'll honour you. And thank you very, very much for sharing your incredible story.

- Wendy, you've got to salute the people that work with me, you've got to salute the people, because they were the wind, as they say, the wind between my sails. I know it was a good time, it was good, but it's unbelievable what I've gained from those that work with me and those that we work with. Unless you are there, and you've been there, you understand why we all get up every day. We can't wait to get back, to be together, to work together, and to work with the amazing people that are in our townships, that may look poor, but they're rich and they're wonderful. Thank you, Wendy. I don't accept this singularly. I accept this with us all. Thank you.

- Thank you, Helen. Well, you are their captain and you earned their trust. And I agree, it is a whole organisation. But thank you very, very much for sharing your story with us.

- Thank you, everybody. Good night.

- Good night, everybody and good night, Helen. Thank you.

- Thank you so much.