

# freesheets forge community

in the peninsula megacity

Like Cinderella, who eventually had her moment in the bright lights, Cape Community Newspapers is no longer the stepchild of Independent Newspapers and is carving a distinct niche for itself. Mansoor Jaffer reports.

**W**hen you have 12 titles reaching 400 000 homes each week and read by one million people, then you're in the big league, whichever way you look at it.

When you do a survey to gauge support for Cape Town's Olympic Bid and 32 000 people respond, then you know you reach deep into the communities you serve.

The 12 community papers – 11 weekly and one monthly – have distinct histories.

Four have their origin in the old Argus company and were launched to serve the burgeoning coloured working class communities in the mid 1980s. Several others were owned by companies or individuals and bought during the 1990s. About two years ago, they were brought together under one roof and three more titles, catering to the northern areas, were added.

The merger was difficult as staff came from diverse backgrounds and were thrown together in cramped offices hidden away on the fourth floor of Newspaper House.

Central team leader Trisha Bam says: "After our painful amalgamation I found myself heading a team which produced two Cape Flats papers and two southern suburbs papers. The southern papers' staff sat on one side of the office because of 'shared interests' and the Flats staff on the other. On one side aggression, the other defensiveness. We 'naturally' divided along racial lines, not knowing how to talk to each other and not knowing how to receive instructions from a white team leader without taking umbrage. And the team leader, coming from the standard white liberal tradition, did not know how to manage and maintain discipline and standards and escape accusations, however indirect, of

being racist. I spent a year tap-dancing on eggshells.

"Social differences caused practical problems. My English is more Hampstead than Hanover Park, so my puns in headlines and instinctive rewriting of copy alienated colleagues and readers. Even the simplest actions were cause for discontent. The trend is to drop honorifics but for someone on the breadline who is part of a community which has bled for the right to be recognised, to be called by your surname alone is disrespectful. In Rondebosch we have headmasters, in Athlone we have principals. In Claremont we want to keep taxis out of sidestreets. In Mitchell's Plain we want more, safer taxis to get to work...

"Slowly, we've come to know more about each other through the stories we write, through the way we respond to issues and through outpourings in the smoking room about the trials and tribulations of our personal lives. We have even reached a point where we can finally begin to celebrate our differences, collective and individual, through teasing and laughter.

"If any group of people can in some way introduce communities to each other, we can. We may be greying, stress-lined and battle-scarred, but we are living proof that it can be done."

CCN's biggest titles are the Athlone News and Plainsman serving the densely populated Athlone and Mitchells Plain areas. They are followed by the Southern Mail and Constantiaberg Bulletin which serve the areas in the southern suburbs of Cape Town; the False Bay Echo which goes to homes surrounding the famous Bay; the Southern Suburbs Tatler, mainly distributed in affluent, predominantly white suburbs; the Atlantic Sun for the Atlantic Seaboard area; Tabletalk in Milnerton and surrounds, and three Tyger talks in the

northern areas. A monthly paper, the Sentinel, is distributed in Hout Bay.

During 1997, the Northern Echo was closed as a result of poor advertising income and the Helderberg Sun ceased publication due to a legal wrangle between the Independent Group and Caxton.

Following the merger CCN has slowly emerged as a powerful vehicle for information and a platform for debate. The papers appear to have struck significant chords with their respective communities, finding a special place in people's lives each week.

Their strong emergence follows similar patterns around the world where community papers are rising to prominence while mainstream dailies and weeklies are battling to boost sagging circulations. Severely under-resourced, the 30-member CCN staff has set about improving the quality of the different titles, building a profile for the group and improving levels of organisation.

The appointment of editor David Hill gave great impetus to this process. The Argus stalwart brought years of experience in editorial and production and through his easy-going style encouraged new levels of unity.

Assistant editor Brian Josselowitz has been an integral part of shaping the new CCN. "In the three years I have been at Cape Community Newspapers the newspapers have improved immensely both in layout and quality of reporting, although we still have some way to go," he says. "I joined Unicorn Publishing to launch a bilingual newspaper for the north, the first in the stable, just months before Unicorn merged with Argus which became the Independent group. We used a lot of council

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One million readers in the Peninsula make Cape Community Newspapers a force to be reckoned with. Author Mansoor Jaffer is at bottom left.