

Mediation



Eastern Cape journalist David MacGregor went out in search of a conflict story and found himself mediating a happy ending.

When I first saw the newspaper headlines of a pending legal spat between a wealthy redneck farmer and a “bushman” tracker over a R50 000 reward I thought “What an awesome story”.

I had visions – after days of reading prominent headlines – of a former apartheid foot soldier who had been shunted from the army to a squalid tent town when the “new” South Africa dawned.

I had in fact written a story last year for the Sunday Tribune about how a handful of former Khoi recces in a tent town had managed to find work guarding rich white farmers’ livestock, with great success – if you were not one of the dead rustlers.

Now, against all odds, one of them had hit the big time and gone from zero to hero when he tracked a little lost boy for 15 km through the rugged Karoo bush and earned the promised R50 000 reward. At least, that is what the newspapers said.

But, a promise means nothing if you don’t have the 50 grand in your pocket and after three months of waiting the tracker went to a lawyer, who phoned the press – who then splashed out with front page headlines how the farmer had not paid the money.

A media ping-pong duel ensued over the next three weeks as the farmer called in his lawyers to cook-up counter charges against the tracker and the story seemed to be slipping into legal quicksand.

I wanted in, and began by making a few calls to both parties to try and get my own feel for the story. The “bushman’s” lawyer seemed the perfect start. He had been splashed across the papers and seemed to be lapping-up the attention the next set of headlines brought. Within minutes I had set up a meeting with the hero and his lawyer.

But, when I got to the meeting my initial angle of the “bushman” tracker who had been given a raw deal his whole life was shattered. The lawyer and I discovered that the hero was not a “bushman”, not a tracker at all, and had never even been to the army. The newspaper reporters had been informed, but they preferred the “bushman” tag and it stuck right to the end.

After speaking to the Botha family, it became apparent that the whole issue had been blown out of proportion by the negative publicity and that they were willing to pay the R50 000.

But, they had not even contacted the hero and as a result of bad press had now suddenly changed their tune. The only problem was nobody had offered to bring the hero to them.

So I began a series of phone calls and after 10 days got both parties to agree to meet. Now, I had my own request: I would bring the hero to Somerset East on one condition – the story would be my exclusive.

Racing through the scorching Karoo heat with the hero at my side and a R50 000 cheque waiting at the other end was an incentive – not knowing what to expect when we got there was the downside. The hero was nervous. I was nervous.

First stop was the kid’s grandad, who promptly handed over the R50 118, 84

cheque – including interest. Easy as pie, no bad vibes at all.

But, the big test still lay ahead. Now, I had to convince the publicity-weary family that the story was not just about the money, and that the hero would have to be re-united with the young boy and his father to put an end to the conflict.

The photosession with the youngster went well. He pounced on the hero’s knee as we sipped juice in the lounge of his grandad’s plush mansion.

But, the real test was getting the farmer father and the hero together – long enough to get some photos, and without starting a fist-fight. After all, the two had been involved in a very bitter and public feud for several weeks and getting the two together would bury the hatchet in the public’s eyes.

As we drove to the father’s farm, the hero began to squirm and sweat visibly. But, he was quickly reassured that he already had the cash – all he had to do now was keep the “mediator” happy and go for a quick picture session with the “villain”.

When we arrived, I quickly jumped out of the car and walked towards the farmer. His first words were: “I am pissed-off with the bad publicity and just want to get this all behind me. Everywhere I go people think I am an arsehole for not paying the money. Take your pictures, so I can get on with my life.”

Convincing the farmer to have a beer with the hero took some doing, but eventually he loosened up and mumbled a few words of thanks while he posed with his arm draped on the nervous hero’s shoulders.

As we left, the hero broke out into a broad smile and hugged me – now he could begin a new life. I was also over the moon. I had scooped the other journalists on the story and just had to hush up the visit until my copy appeared.

Instead of fueling the conflict, I thought a mountain was being made of a molehill and decided to see if both groups wanted to resolve the issue. Any one of the journalists on the story could have “mediated” the issue and they had had several weeks start on me.

I suppose bad news makes good news and telephone journalism is far easier than travelling to the players. With the words “don’t let the facts get in the way of a good story” still ringing in my ears, I realised how simple life really is. The problem is we journalists tend to prefer to complicate things.

You’ll probably remember the story. A “bushman” tracker found three-year-old Natie Botha, who had been missing in the Karoo bushveld for 72 hours. Great joy in the press. Then the story got more dramatic. The Afrikaans farmer was refusing to pay the R50 000 reward.

David MacGregor had not been involved in this story. He decided to take a look. Not only did he find an entirely different reality from what had been reported, he found himself playing the role of mediator.

Left: Hero Anthony Jansen and lost child Natie Botha.

