

# building bridges

South Africa is a society in transition. This phase requires a lot of debate, openness and engagement of the various sectors of society and its people. Newspapers are well placed to provide this kind of platform as they are in a way a meeting place for all shades of opinion and people.

This is a role the *Evening Post* has taken for itself in the Greater Port Elizabeth metropole. As a result, the paper has become synonymous with community activism or, as Americans call it, civic journalism. We seek to become involved in rebuilding our country not only as fence-sitters and observers, but sometimes as organisers and active participants.

Our policy is that a newspaper in a developing African country has to be an instrument for social, economic and political development, and should also be used to strengthen our hard-won democracy through promoting values such as freedom of expression and public participation in the policy-making and governing process, as well as creating a culture of open debate.

Our public outreach programmes also take place against a background in which many people, black people in particular, have never had equal access to the media as a platform for debate, or to have their stories told.

In addition, the people of this country from different racial groups rarely get an opportunity to get together to talk openly about the different problems facing them, be it job losses, crime, affirmative action, race and racism, or violence against women and children in the home and outside.

We have therefore begun programmes that will bring people together and get them to talk in our newspaper, as well as in various venues in Port Elizabeth.

Our opinion pages have become an intellectual battlefield, as writers from all ideological persuasions and social backgrounds engage each other on all kinds of issues, from racism to job creation to HIV/Aids and gender equality.

The guest column 'Brainwaves', which started out as a weekly column, is now published at least three times a week due to the volume of copy received from our columnists, who range from academics to blue-collar workers.

But what has become a clear *Evening Post* trademark are the public debates held every month in the Port Elizabeth City Hall or at the Great Centenary Hall in New Brighton township. The topics have ranged from crime, affirmative action, HIV/Aids, an analysis of the Thabo Mbeki presidency, human rights and the land invasions in Zimbabwe.

A milestone for us was an election preview debate held in May last year to interrogate the different political manifestos. We brought together local and national leaders of six political parties: the ANC, Democratic Party, New National Party, Pan Africanist Congress, Azanian People's Organisation and the United Democratic Movement. More than 2 000 highly charged supporters of the different parties came, clad in different party regalia and singing

songs and chanting slogans. Police and marshalls had their hands full trying to ensure that each party kept to its corner, but the tolerance displayed by the Port Elizabethans on the day, despite rising election fever, was remarkable.

We felt we had achieved our purpose of showcasing our diversity and contributing to entrenching a culture of freedom of association and freedom of expression. The debates take a lot of organising, but the end result is so satisfying that it justifies all the logistical nightmares.

The excitement of the debates is the manner in which they force political leaders and public servants to be accountable to the people they serve. We have had MECs and other public servants being grilled by our readers for lack of delivery. Readers appreciate that we bring people to them that they do not have easy access to.

We also run a bi-monthly Decision Makers Forum where business people, senior public officials and professionals get together for briefings on issues of importance to them. We have a problematic situation where decisions affecting our lives are taken in Pretoria, Johannesburg or Cape Town, without the people of the Eastern Cape having an input or even being informed.

This forum provides the opportunity to bridge the gap between the information haves and information have-nots. We invite national speakers, and in addition to information sharing, the forum provides an excellent opportunity for business people to meet, both from the established and mainly white sector and the emerging, mainly black, sector.

The *Evening Post* also plays a key role in education. We publish a matric supplement twice a week since most schools do not receive textbooks. We have become involved in promoting the culture of learning and teaching in our schools by launching a Winners-in-Education project with other business sponsors. This is a competition aimed at rewarding excellence in disadvantaged schools, and proving that miracles can be achieved in education even with few resources.

Our independent judges visit schools to make assessments. This information is passed on to the Education Department, so that they can be made aware of the difficulties the school has, and then find ways of providing much needed material support.

We strongly feel that our role as a newspaper during this transitional period goes beyond pontification, and that we should contribute to building a new society, one which would – in return – appreciate the role of the media in their lives.

■ Lakela Kaunda is editor of the *Evening Post*.

**VUSI KHUMALO**  
b.1958

**Reconcile**

This work is about reconciling our history, in particular the Battle of Grahamstown which took place on April 22 1819. The central figures symbolise the close encounter of the British soldiers and the Xhosa warriors in conflict. The Kowie River runs between both the soldier's and the warrior's legs, while behind the British soldier is the Fort England barracks, the British military base.

Beyond the Xhosa warrior is Makanaskop, where the attack in defence of the invaded land was possibly orchestrated. Above the central figures, hovering over our history with its wings extended, is a dove holding a flower in its beak as a symbol of peace and reconciliation.



Port Elizabeth's *Evening Post* gets cross-community conversation going, reports **Lakela Kaunda.**