



# UPSTART

the paper for youth by youth

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The city of Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape is renowned for its educational institutions. With Rhodes University the backbone of the city's economic activity, Grahamstown is also home to prestigious private schools like St Andrew's, Kingswood and DSG – noted for schooling the captains of industry and children of the new political and economic elite.

In the west of the city, not too far from these prestigious institutions, an informal study conducted in a Grade 8 class at a historically-disadvantaged school found that a quarter of the learners were functionally illiterate.

In 2007, the city's seven disadvantaged high schools produced 45 learners with matric exemptions – while one private school obtained 83 exemptions.

Grahamstown is also home to the oldest independent newspaper in South Africa – *Grocott's Mail* has been published since May 1870.

In 2003, *Grocott's* was purchased by Rhodes University which created a limited liability company called the David Rabkin Project for Experiential Journalism.

The project publishes a bi-weekly community newspaper and provides workplace experience for journalism students at universities in the Eastern Cape.

At a *Grocott's Mail* Advisory Board meeting in 2007, concern was raised about the huge gap between school leavers' results and it was decided to initiate a campaign to excite young people about reading and writing.

An obvious role *Grocott's Mail* could play was to encourage young people to produce their own newspaper. After consultation with local NGOs, education officials and other stakeholders, a need was identified for enhancing literacy and a culture of reading among Grade 8, 9 and 10 learners.

In mid-2008, with the support of school principals, *Upstart* clubs were formed at seven historically-disadvantaged high schools in Grahamstown. An advertisement was placed in *Grocott's Mail* calling on learners in those grades who were interested in starting a youth newspaper project to sign up as members.

*Upstart* was thus established, with the assistance of postgraduate diploma students in the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies. Their involvement was on the basis of service learning, meaning that their work on the project would be assessed and also credit bearing.





Journalism students applied the theories they learnt to the establishment of newspaper clubs. This culminated in the production of the first edition of *Upstart* – a 12-page tabloid newspaper.

Since then *Upstart* has expanded into more than a newspaper project, encompassing other educational and social issues. After the first edition, the project extended into former Model C schools, including an Afrikaans-medium school.

For the first time, there was a project in the city that encompassed young people from all race groups and all the three languages spoken in the Eastern Cape.

There are now 12 *Upstart* clubs with more than 300 members, who meet weekly. Membership has grown so fast that it has been necessary to restrict further growth, and a strict code of conduct has been adopted to ensure more discipline and commitment.

This is the only newspaper for the youth by the youth in South Africa. *Upstart* members identify issues that they would like to address in an edition, and write about these. There are regular workshops, discussion and outings to provide members with experiences to write about.

Students conduct in-depth research and interviews for articles and write prose, poetry, letters and book reviews. Members are encouraged to write in their home languages, but as the medium of instruction at schools is English, most opt to write in English.

After each edition is published, the various clubs meet to evaluate the paper. These gatherings congregate students from different socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds and cultures – and some interact with students from other social backgrounds for the first time in their lives.

*Upstart* members have been assisted to join public libraries and competitions are held to encourage reading. Some members have learned computer skills for the first time, and all now have email addresses and can navigate the Internet.

Many *Upstart* members grow up in homes where reading a newspaper is not a daily activity. They tend to have extremely poor knowledge of the world around them. The project introduces members to the power of the print media and the skills required to produce a newspaper. This seeks to inculcate the habit of reading newspapers and to empower them to become better informed citizens of South Africa and the world.

By fostering an enjoyment of reading and writing we hope to improve members' chances of entering higher education and making informed career choices.

The first group of Rhodes journalism students involved in *Upstart* faced a steep learning curve and many dilemmas. On one of their first visits to a disadvantaged school, they watched a learner fetching the teacher assigned to help *Upstart* from a tavern across the road.

The journalism students found themselves torn between assisting the enthusiastic learners and their journalistic urge to report on the teacher and the conditions at the school. Back on campus this led to lively discussions with their journalism lecturers about boundaries and ethics.

Lara Solomon, a postgraduate diploma student commented: "I found the *Upstart* programme to be



beneficial to my studies as well as for the pupils that my group was working with. I benefited through putting what I had learned in my course into practice, and they benefited through practising their second-language skills and learning the basics of a trade that can be put to use in later life."

Another student notes that "It was a humbling experience to work with a 16-year-old whose writing skills are very poor or nonexistent."

Service learning as a form of community engagement is mutually beneficial to the university and its students and the *Upstart* project which is under-resourced, under-funded and has a staff complement of just two.

This year, the second in *Upstart's* operation, fourth-year radio journalism students have worked with *Upstart* members to produce a radio show. *Upstart* members keen to learn more about broadcasting were asked to submit essays on why they should be chosen for the programme.

Through this process six were selected to attend workshops twice a week, learning the journalism and media studies school's second-year curriculum for radio broadcasting.

They are taught writing techniques for radio, how to use equipment and how to look for stories. They are sent out over weekends with recording equipment and meet weekly to review their stories. As the broadcast launch date nears, extra workshop sessions are being held on Saturday afternoons.

Ideas for broadcast items are discussed at the weekly *Upstart* club meetings and contributions, including a jingle composed for the show, have been developed by members. The hour-long show which is to be broadcast on Saturdays and Sundays will be hosted on Rhodes Music Radio, which has a high listenership throughout the Grahamstown community.

Other service learning projects this year include working with the Rhodes' Department of Pharmacy to deliver eight workshops for two *Upstart* clubs on healthy lifestyles. This was in response to information gathered from members that many of their parents and immediate relatives had died of Aids-related illnesses or were HIV-positive.

The members also report very high incidences of hypertension, tuberculosis, obesity and alcoholism in their communities. The workshops are aimed at changing the lifestyles and eating habits of the younger generation.

A series of workshops run by Rhodes University's Chinese Studies second-year students will enable *Upstart* members to begin to examine their situations from a different perspective. The students will use their knowledge of traditional Chinese cultural values to address the challenges *Upstart* members face in their communities.

Stories from a different and ancient culture could become an impetus for *Upstart* members to become more self-reliant and to work harder to achieve their goals.

Second-year masters students in psychology will work with *Upstart* members for a semester as part of fulfilling the practical component of their degrees. During weekly sessions *Upstart* members will receive counselling and clubs will learn life skills.

One of the great achievements of *Upstart* is narrowing the differential opportunities that exist for those who live in the east and west of the city by harnessing the myriad resources available through the university, NGOs and communities.

*Upstart* members are now more comfortable meeting at the Rhodes library or the Albany Museum, which once was as far removed from their lives as Shanghai.

A great lesson of *Upstart* is that despite the wild and scary rhetoric that emanates from some who claim to speak for the youth, *Upstart* members still believe there can be a better future for all.

*Upstart* has encouraged its members to interact with the world with greater self-belief and confidence, and to think and dream beyond their realities. In a letter to *Upstart* Anesipho Sam, a grade 9 learner from Ntaba Maria School says, "Every time I read *Upstart* I feel inspired and motivated to do more in life... you've changed how people think and live their lives."