

Janetje van der Merwe

Janetje van der Merwe embodies the spirit and purpose of Soroptimist International. She joined SI Pretoria in 1990 and has remained committed and involved in Club projects, all levels of leadership and Club activity to this day. Her energy and sense of fun and friendship constantly energize the membership! In her generosity she is ever-willing to contribute to all local, national and global SI projects. However, her passion over the last almost 30 years has focused on the social and economic empowerment of women through the Mapula Embroidery Project, which was initiated as a Club response to extreme poverty in a peri-urban area, the Winterveld, outside Pretoria, South Africa. Through encouraging the women's creativity and skills development and the building of a community of embroiderers in a non-profit enterprise, the Mapula Embroidery Project has enhanced the sense of self-worth and confidence of over 200 women and, through income generation, provided for basic needs and improved the lived experiences and prospects of the women and their children beyond measure.



Janetje van der Merwe has, as an SI Club member and volunteer, alongside her demanding professional career, led and developed, with an inclusive and democratic approach, what started as a humble community project into a recognised leading art/craft initiative in South Africa which has received multiple awards, features in art/craft books and academic articles and forms part of university, corporate and textile collections globally. Much of the interest in the work centres around the way in which the embroiderers portray their experiences – political, economic, social – using a simple needle and thread. The project's reputation for creating exceptional works has resulted in it being included in the itineraries of specialised textile tour groups from abroad. Its bread and butter range of usable art is popular both locally and internationally and has ensured a steady, modest income for the women. Janetje has built enviable networks whose trust and loyal support of the project are invaluable and enduring.

To address the sustainability of the Mapula Project a Trust, independent from her Soroptimist Club, was formed in 2016. Janetje serves as vice-chair on this Trust with two embroiderers and other trustees. She is committed to ensuring the flourishing of the project and community of embroiderers way into the future.

Her generosity and commitment to the empowerment of women traverses borders. Under her leadership and guidance and with global Soroptimist funding from SI Ede in the Netherlands, she has travelled with project embroiderers and Club members multiple times to Rwanda, and in Kibeho they have trained local, extremely disempowered women in embroidery, sewing and the establishment of what is now a successful enterprise providing income for a very poor community.

The affection that the embroiderers have for Janetje and the acknowledgement of the impact that the project has had on their lives are reflected in a praise poem which was captured in embroidery by the women and given to her. On a continent where advanced years are revered they bestow the ultimate blessing on Janetje:

'Long may Janetje grow as old as the mountain.'