

BY ELIZABETH ATMORE

touched by an Angel

*2011 CLARINS/FAIRLADY
Most Dynamic Woman
of the Year Angela Larkan
has the perfect name for
the person she is.*



Nine years ago, Angela Larkan sat in her college dorm room in Connecticut, US, procrastinating – she was reading articles online. Forward to 2012, and Angela, now living on the KZN South Coast, has no time for procrastination: one of the articles she read that day, warning of the millions of children who would be left orphaned by Aids by 2010, prompted her to head back to the country of her birth to research the problem further and find a way of becoming part of the solution. The result? Launching Thanda, a programme designed to offer support to orphans and vulnerable children in

rural South Africa, and thereby being chosen as the 2011 Clarins/FAIRLADY Most Dynamic Woman of the Year.

'After reading that article I applied for a grant to go to South Africa to see what solutions were being developed and where investment should be placed. As soon as I was in those communities, seeing large groups of young children running around by themselves, empty huts with four gravestones in the yard, grannies raising their children's children, and learning that there could be more than five million orphans by 2015, I knew that I had to work to find solutions

for this crisis.

'I did years of research during and after college, developing a model that uses existing school buildings, works alongside local teachers, and hires unemployed youth from the community to support orphans and vulnerable children through after-school programmes.'



LEFT: ANGELA WITH STAFF. RIGHT: DOWN TO BASICS. OPPOSITE: SURROUNDED BY LOVE...



Together with her boyfriend Tyler Howard, she moved back to South Africa and put the research into practice. The philosophy of Thanda is designed specifically so it can be replicated anywhere in the country: 'Thanda has been designed as a local think tank so that we can thoroughly research the underlying causes of poverty and HIV/Aids from the epicentre of the crisis,' says Angela. 'Our programme implementation is creative and flexible to ensure that we meet the needs of SA's ever-evolving rural population.'

Right now, in Thanda's launch community, this means providing meals to 325 children every day and running after-school care programmes where local children are given the space to play, learn and find support in the form of young role models (sourced from within the community and upskilled in a variety of trades). They're also taught valuable lessons in agriculture, construction, computer literacy and sport, all in a safe space where they are given the attention they need.

'We get feedback from teachers who say that they can almost immediately start seeing a difference in "Thanda children", both physically and in terms

of their ability to concentrate and participate in class.' With the prize money from this award, Angela

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has firming her goal for 2012: to double the number of children reached by Thanda. 'Before we won this award we focused on surviving: we were operating on a month-to-month basis and wondering each month whether we were going to be able to carry on providing meals and paying our teachers' stipends. But this money gives us the breathing space to look at the bigger picture, to find partners, to network, and to look towards working with bigger NGOs and government partners.' Angela has the same goal for her children: to make the leap from surviving to thriving. 'The kids at Thanda are survivors. But through Thanda we want to give them the space to do more than that: with guidance, trust, friendship and support, they thrive and start to take on leadership roles in their homes and schools. 'The best moments are what we now call "Thanda moments". These are precious moments when we realise that we are helping, that we're part of something so incredibly important. ❖

'Then I know we're making a difference' (from Angela's blog)

- I end up on a visit overseas sitting cross-legged on my bed from childhood, typing as fast as I can. Tears stream down my face and I think 'I've finally lost it. I can't do this any more.' It's just too hard to go from one extreme to the other and I think, 'Does anybody notice? Does anybody really care?'
- They say that five people die from Aids each minute; each minute we think about the fact that we are out of Ziplocs, that we shouldn't eat too much today, that the driver at that stoplight was such a jerk. The dichotomy is hard. And when Thanda continues to run out of funding every month, I am not sure what we are doing is worth it any more. Then I go out to the community where we are working and I watch. I sit back and what I see makes me bite my lip and cry. Twelve Thanda teachers, who just a few years ago were out of work, are now themselves designing programmes that will change their students' lives. Programmes that will motivate, educate, and fill in the gaps left by too many missing parents.
- When I stand inside the library we are building...
- When our basketball coach, Melusi, posts on Facebook: 'My generation will make a change... every time I bounce a ball I realise that basketball is not just a sport, it's a way to heal those lonely hearts without parents, to work as a team/family, to think outside the box, to bring education closer to their hands and heart; basketball is a way [to] show how to come up with a solution in any life situation. Basketball is a lot more than a sport - so let's spread the love of basketball in rural areas'.