

# A PLACE WHERE LOVE GROWS

Angela's acclaimed after-care school is a haven of play and learning for an Aids-ravaged community



Tyler Howard, Angela Larkin and three of the centre's teachers, Melusi Cele, Nosipho Sithole and Twin Doyisa.

IT'S a hot Sunday afternoon in Hibberdene, a coastal village 100 km south of Durban. The dirt roads are deserted as people enjoy their Sunday lunch indoors – deserted, that is, apart from a group of teenage boys waiting with barely concealed impatience in the shade of a marula tree outside the local basketball courts.

Dressed in freshly ironed green-and-white basketball kit the teens are desperate to hit the courts at the newly built Thanda Library. Their faces break into wide grins when a white van pulls up and a striking young woman gets out.

Their eyes focus on one thing only: the keys jingling in her

hand. Their patience extends to just a quick hello before Angela Larkin (27) unlocks the gate and they dart onto the courts.

"We don't normally open the school during weekends," Angela says, "but the kids are so excited about the playground and the courts. There's still a lot of work to be done but we're getting there and soon we'll be able to open the centre seven days a week."

Angela and her boyfriend, Tyler Howard, opened the Thanda Afterschool Centre in 2008. It's situated near the local school and provides a library, playground and of course basketball courts to 325 school-

children in the area.

"Our main aim was to give kids the opportunity to play sports and do arts. We also provide the kids with one meal a day, Monday to Friday."

Angela hit headlines when she was named Levi's Go Forth ambassador for the month of September. Each month the recently launched campaign showcases the work of pioneering individuals from across the globe who tackle the world's greatest challenges. In August Hollywood star Matt Damon's charity, water.org, was chosen.

"This is such an honour," Angela says. "We've been doing this for more than five years

without much recognition and it's been hard.

"Financially it's a struggle every month but it's better now than in the beginning when we had a lot of logistical problems. The media coverage from Levi's alone has already brought in more donations and it's making a huge difference."

Angela was also in the news after she was interviewed by shock-jock Gareth Cliff on his 5FM breakfast show and he made the comment that resulted in him being reported to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.

When Cliff heard she'd started Thanda at age 22 he remarked

how unlike other young women she was. "Most 22-year-olds do nothing but lie on their backs with their legs open," he said.

Angela wouldn't be drawn into the furore that erupted. The incident was blown out of proportion, she says. "I wish people got as fired up about fighting HIV/Aids as they did about that."

Fired up is certainly the best way to describe Angela. She has seemingly boundless energy for all the projects she and Tyler run, including an agricultural venture where they help families start their own vegetable gardens.

"Most of the children now have gardens at home," Tyler (29) says. "You now have kids bringing food to the table. It's taught them responsibility."

Angela watches the kids as they charge around the court. "A lot of the children are traumatised when they come to Thanda but they soon flourish," she says. "We're really proud of the work we do here."

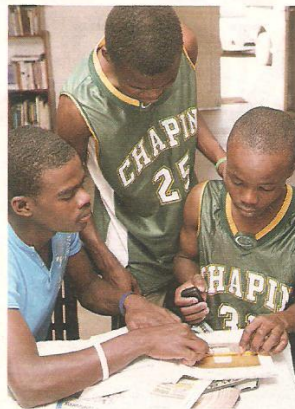
BORN in Durban but raised in the US after her family emigrated when she was 12, Angela never dreamt she would one day be living in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

But her destiny was sealed at 19 when she was studying towards a BA degree in social studies at Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

"I read an article predicting there would be around five million Aids orphans in South Africa by 2015. That upset me so much because having spent years in South Africa I knew the country couldn't handle so many orphans."

She decided to focus her studies on SA's Aids orphans and in 2002 received funding from her university to research the topic further in KwaZulu-Natal, which has the highest number of Aids orphans.

She found orphanages could provide only basic shelter and food – they didn't have the resources to build playgrounds or develop extramural programmes to help kids cultivate essential



**TOP LEFT:** The boys have really taken to basketball – some have been chosen for the provincial team. **TOP RIGHT:** Melusi (left) was once one of the students at Thanda but now coaches the basketball team. **ABOVE:** Angela poses with the senior basketball team.

life skills.

"I then designed a model that could be used to teach kids life skills using sports and creative projects. The model was my final thesis."

After graduating in 2005 Angela, then aged 22, started Thanda – which means love in isiZulu – and launched the website [www.thanda.org](http://www.thanda.org) to find solutions for the care of Aids orphans and vulnerable children.

"I wanted to give hope to children in poor, Aids-ravaged communities. When I came to Hibberdene the first thing I realised was there were no parents here. It was just children and grannies, and the kids had no role models they could look up to."

She and Tyler, who'd been dating since high school, continued their relationship long-

distance with him back in America. When she finally raised enough money to start the centre in 2008 he moved to South Africa to join her. "I just got sucked into it," he says. "I'd visited South Africa three times before moving here and I saw a lot of opportunity."

TALL, broad-shouldered Tyler is especially proud of the cen-

tre's basketball team. "The boys have really taken to the game," he says, beaming. "Some have even been chosen for the provincial team."

Angela's green eyes sparkle as she introduces us to 13-year-old Dumisani Gumede, one of their success stories.

"Before he came to Thanda the other kids used to laugh at him because he worked in the fields. He was withdrawn and couldn't even look at you when you spoke to him."

Dumisani is now an assertive young man and captains the junior basketball team. "I want to become something one day," he says confidently.

"Even though my mother passed away last month I still have hope for the future because of Thanda."

He has one main goal: to finish matric. "No failing for me!" he says, earning himself a proud smile from Angela.

In addition to the centre she also runs a jewellery business, Thanda Zulu, exporting beaded earrings, bracelets and necklaces made by local women. She ploughs the profits back into the centre which employs 12 youths to supervise the activities. "It doesn't cover all the costs but it helps."

Angela and Tyler – who have no plans to marry any time soon – would love to have the funding to implement the Thanda model in other disadvantaged communities.

"This is just the beginning," she smiles brightly. "I believe we can have a Thanda centre in every school in Africa." □

■ **To donate visit the website [thanda.org](http://thanda.org).**

**GO ON, GET INVOLVED!**

Angela shares her tips on how to turn a charitable idea into something real.

- Believe in your ideas – only with passion can you make things happen.
- Always work from within the community. It will help you understand the bigger picture.
- Whatever you do, do it creatively. Times change so try to come up with new and exciting solutions.
- Stay positive – focus on the goal at hand.
- Don't complicate things. "We bring in experts when we need to, but the kids appreciate just having someone there who'll listen to them."