

COVID-19 risks to vulnerable communities are real - but one activist steps up and makes a vital difference

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We're in this together. Extraordinary times require an extraordinary response. Our people and partners have responded by dedicating time and resources to various initiatives.

This is how a community activist has stepped up for the poorest of the poor during the COVID-19 crisis.

Outspoken, indefatigable, intrepid, impassioned. These are some of the many words that rightly describe Joanie Fredericks, "activist on the ground" extraordinaire in the community of Tafelsig in Mitchells Plain, on the Cape Flats in the Western Cape.

Perhaps this formidable demeanour is what it takes to get people to sit up and take notice of marginalised communities – especially during a virulent pandemic when normal support systems are turned on their heads and food supply suddenly stops. With the onset of the severe level 5 lockdown, NGOs closed their doors and many families were no longer able to look after each other. Since then, the need for food relief has increased exponentially, as people have lost their income and depleted all other resources. And Joanie is their champion.

"The reality is that sponsors are no longer able to help and we are battling to feed our communities." *Joanie Fredericks*

Serendipity

One person who did sit up and take notice was Futuregrowth's Conway Williams. In the 1980s Conway's father, James Williams, was the Principal of Imperial Primary School in Mitchell's Plain, and Conway and his sisters would regularly accompany their father into this impoverished area. With these trips, they got to witness first-hand the suffering and deprivation within this poor community, and became socialised from an early age to give back to their fellow man.



When he became aware of the work that Joanie was doing to feed people in the very area that left its indelible impression on him as a young child, Conway mobilised his family to start making sandwiches for her on a regular basis. This led Conway to set up a crowdfunding campaign and help start the process of formalising the organisation in a way that would facilitate Section 18A donations. Futuregrowth staff got to hear about Conway's private initiative and opened their hearts (and wallets), knowing that that every little bit helps.

When you look past her tough exterior, Joanie's undeniable compassion and humour shine through, as does her gratitude for every bit of help she receives, no matter how big or small. She is meticulous about thanking each donor publicly (unless they request otherwise) on her various social media platforms for their help. Donors are also welcome to visit the area to observe how their contributions are put to use, at any time (provided masks are worn of course). This adds an important element of transparency and credibility to the project and gives sponsors comfort that there is little chance of misappropriation or corruption here.

"Thank you to: ... our dear friend and hero supporter Conway Williams! With humanitarians such as these, I am not worried, I know we will make it out together on the other side of Covid-19." *Joanie Fredericks*

Tafelsig Mitchells Plain CAN – defeating COVID-19 by solving hunger

When the lockdown regulations were announced, this had an immediate and devastating effect on the people of Tafelsig, many of whom were already food insecure and now faced increasingly dire circumstances. Food-insecure households are more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 due to scarce access to adequate health care, lower resistance and compromised immune systems, and a lack of information about proper prevention and care. Joanie was aware of this and knew that a well-thought out plan would need to be put in place if her local community had any hope of surviving the pandemic.

With anger and concern that community members were not consulted on the practical implications before the restrictions were imposed, Joanie started the Tafelsig Mitchells Plain SE CAN (Community Action Network) to galvanise the community to work together to take care of each other. She realised that, in order to get to the real work of addressing the virus, people needed to be fed first – and this was the primary aim of the Tafelsig CAN.

The scheme started off with a simple, cost-effective and easily replicable system to feed 300 people per day, focusing initially on vulnerable children, people with disabilities and the elderly. Within weeks it was feeding 10 000 of the 90 000-strong population of Tafelsig.

"The question cannot be whether to die of hunger or coronavirus".
Joanie Fredericks

It was decided not to distribute food parcels but rather to supply each person with a warm meal. Because of prevalent substance abuse in the area, the contents of parcels would typically be sold to support addictions. This was one aspect Joanie would have raised with the government, had she had the chance, and makes one wonder how effective the formal food parcel programmes have been in other regions.



Change champions

A community network of “Change Champions” was established, to take responsibility for the wellbeing of the residents in their surrounding blocks, and trained in all aspects of hygienic food preparation and social distancing.

Apart from nourishing ingredients, there was a dire need for donations of large cooking pots, as one of these champions attests: “I don't have a big pot. When I cook I make a few pots of food and it's not easy at all. I don't want the big pot. I NEED IT. So even if I must work or do something for it... You name it. However... If there is anyone who needs it more then bless them with it and I will gladly wait for my turn.”

Ripple effect

The need for large cooking vessels persists, as more mouths have to be fed and more Change Champions come on board. Upon hearing about the support received from Futuregrowth staff and the success of Conway's crowdfunding campaign, Joanie and her team's efforts caught the attention of various benefactors. Not only did the CAN receive donations of equipment from various individuals, Futuregrowth sister boutique, African Infrastructure Investment Managers (AIIM), facilitated by Chanine Williams, generously donated soup mix, gas burners and large pots to Joanie and her team.

“Tafelsig Mitchells Plain CAN does not slumber...nor do we sleep!”

Joanie Fredericks

Further to this, the owner and founder of HotChefsSA, Ammaarah Petersen, who herself faced reduced trading conditions during lockdown, put a plan together to deliver highly nourishing cooked food at R550 per 60 litre pot (including ingredients and delivery), balancing the need to keep her staff busy during these times, and giving sponsors a tangible and an easily accessible opportunity to make a meaningful difference.

Giving to those more in need

At the end of April, Joanie and her Change Champions received a donation of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) gear, which they proudly donned. Shortly after this, it came to Joanie's attention that there was a critical shortage of PPE for health care workers who desperately needed it to save lives.

So, it was unanimously agreed that all their lovely new PPE suits would be given to the local ambulance crew, as, Joanie explained “these are the men and women who selflessly put their lives at risk throughout their careers to serve us, to protect us and to hold our hands in times when even our closest family members are not there for us.”

“Charity means to be able to GIVE as graciously as we RECEIVE!”

Joanie Fredericks

In keeping with the theme of projects close to Joanie’s heart, she also started a lockdown baby club, with the hope of attracting sponsors/donors to assist with providing new-born essentials to less-fortunate Tafelsig moms giving birth during quarantine.

Plea to the President

When Joanie set up the Tafelsig CAN in April 2020, she posted a video on its Facebook page, where she called on President Cyril Ramaphosa to consult people on the ground about their needs and how best these could be addressed. Within hours the video went viral on social media. Within a week of posting, a delegation from the President’s office was sent out to see the work being done in the community and they were promised assistance. Five months later, despite repeated requests, this has yet to come.

One can sense Joanie’s despair: “During lockdown the need for assistance, not just in my immediate community but from communities around South Africa, has increased tenfold. The stark reality is that there is not enough. We do not have enough. Feeding schemes across the country do not have enough. Soup kitchens countrywide are running dry. Organisations are forced to turn queuing people away as there is either not enough or there isn’t anything to give. At the start of lockdown in March of this year, our President made a promise to us and that is that the most vulnerable in our country will be taken care of. And to date nothing has happened.”

What About the People

As a result of the lack of action, Joanie has decided to take a class action case against the President to the Constitutional Court. With the help of comedian and fellow activist, Marc Lottering, she has compiled a video that tells the stories of the desperate across South Africa, with the plea: “We need you to hear the plight of our communities, listen to our potential solution to the deepening crisis and then assist us in feeding our people, as enshrined in the Constitution. Our voices must and will be heard, the people are hungry, Mr President.”

Marc Lottering penned the words for a song titled “What About the People”, which is performed by “The Voice” winner, Craig Lucas, on the soundtrack to the video. While waiting for the court case to be heard (or government relief to come), Joanie and Marc have set up a non-profit campaign – the “What About The People Food Fund” - to assist community feeding schemes and soup kitchens across the country. They urge the public to follow the Fund’s Facebook page to learn about the heroes and their powerful initiatives nationwide, and to support and help them serve their communities.

“We are in this together and together we will walk out on the other side of COVID-19.” *Joanie Fredericks*

Paying it forward

Joanie works tirelessly on behalf of the needy; it is disgraceful that she gets no help from any social or government programme. She grew up in a household with domestic violence, and is herself a survivor of violence and abuse. As a result, she has a particular interest in fighting against gender-based violence and says that community work is in her genes. Her attention and care is evident in the various initiatives she has built up over the years.



She co-founded the **NEAD Community Development** non-profit organisation that is committed to providing a platform for progressive social development aligned with UN global sustainable development goals of addressing Gender Equality, Sustainable Cities and Communities.

“If I had known how much easier it would be [via Zoom] to reach so many more learner drivers to teach and prepare them for the dreaded Learner License Test, I would have done so many moons ago.”

Joanie Fredericks

To realise her mission to emancipate and empower women in underprivileged communities, Joanie founded **Ladies Own Transport Services**, a 100% women-owned transport services company that develops women drivers in underprivileged communities, to improve access to meaningful jobs in the transport industry.

As mentioned above, she started **Baby CAN**, to support mothers giving birth during lockdown, who were unable to source or afford essential baby items. This programme is ongoing and is extended to victims of abuse.

With all her projects, Joanie's aim is to empower the people of her community and equip them to become active agents of change, so that they can make a difference collectively and see the community flourish.

Keeping the food coming

Joanie has indeed been noticed - by the likes of Springbok rugby captain Siya Kolisi and his humanitarian wife Rachel amongst countless others. But the battle she is fighting is not one with an easy or even likely conclusion.

Recently, Joanie was invited to share her story on the television show Die Koevert; to share some insights at the inaugural Progressive Blacks in Information and Communication Technology (PBICT) workshop where she shared the stage with some of South Africa's most influential women leaders; and as a guest on Jakaranda FM's Good Morning Angels breakfast show. On hearing about her struggles, Jakaranda generously donated R50 000 towards the CAN's efforts. Permission has been granted for these proceeds to be used towards the purchase of a bakkie to collect donations – to reduce the reliance on friends and family for these transport services. Joanie notes that of late, collecting donations and transporting them to the various Change Champions has become a major obstacle. While the R50 000 will contribute greatly towards the cost of a vehicle, the organisation will require support in this endeavor, and is thus calling on anyone and everyone willing and able, for assistance.

"We will keep on advocating for the rights of every human being to be able to eat a decent meal at least once a day. Thank you for seeing what I see." *Joanie Fredericks*

Fighting endemic hunger that has been vastly exacerbated by COVID-19 is a relentless and never-ending task: each meal provides only a temporary reprieve and stomachs are soon empty all over again. Public interest waxes and wanes, and the effort to keep food donations rolling takes phenomenal energy and commitment. Thank goodness, for the sake of the thousands she is feeding, Joanie has these in bucket-loads.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

As Joanie says, “the nationwide lockdown is meant to keep us behind closed doors, but we cannot allow it to close our hearts.”

- **Cash deposits**, which will be used to provide hot meals to thousands of children and adults facing hunger as a result of the lockdown (Tafelsig Mitchells Plain CAN, First National Bank, Account number 62863273373, Branch code 204209, swift code FIRNZAJJ).
- Donate, contribute to, or offer at a nominal price, **a bakkie or other vehicle** to help with transport of the Champions and collection of donations.
- **Donate R1 695 to Conway’s crowdfunding campaign** – or any amount above R1 – to enable it to reach its target.
- Donate **R550 towards nutritious food provided by HotChefsSA**. This will cover the cost of ingredients and cooking of one giant pot of nourishing food. To become involved in this initiative, contact Ammaarah Petersen directly (084 267 5986, info@trio.org.za).
- Donate **a large 60 or 100 litre cooking pot**. The 100 litre pot will be used by a Change Champion to cook a meal for up to 300 people, with the 60 litre pot used to cook accompanying rice.
- Donate **gas burners or gas**, to be used in the cooking process.
- Supply **loudhailers**, for encouraging the community to join the CAN WhatsApp groups.
- Provide **airtime and data** for the Champions, who do what they do voluntarily.
- Contribute **baby bottles, clothes, cots, nappies, wipes and prams** to assist expectant mothers living in poverty or escaping domestic violence.
- Other items needed: **sanitisers, soaps, paper towels, toilet paper, flu and cold medicines, and water buckets** for washing hands.
- **Drop-off** anything that will help at: 31 Dassenberg Street, Tafelsig, Mitchells Plain (25.5 km from Futuregrowth’s office).
- **Spread the word**. Every bit of publicity encourages others to help in some small way. This has kept the project going against all odds up to now.
- To get involved in any other way, **contact Joanie** via WhatsApp on 076 621 0245 or email: hello@mitchellsplaincan.co.za

For further information on Joanie and her activities:

1. [An overview of the project’s beginnings in April 2020](#)
2. [Tafelsig, Mitchells Plain CAN](#)
3. [What About The People Food Fund](#)

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