



"I want to be Hannah Montana," says young Zarah in Cape Town's colourful Bo Kaap suburb.



The chair in front of the tumulus at Maropeng in the [Cradle of Humankind](#) .



"I just saw this chair and had to sit on it, it's wonderful and makes me feel proud. I wish for clean water. My children are always sick because the water in Khayelitsha is so bad."



South African music legend Johnny Clegg takes his turn in the chair.



Claire Johnston of Mango Groove was charmed by the work and care that went onto the chair's construction.



The Dream Chair overlooking the Johannesburg city centre.

(Images: [Dreams for Africa](#) )

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*Wilma den Hartigh*

A spectacular hand-beaded chair is getting South Africans talking about their dreams and expectations for their country, their communities and themselves.

The Dreams for Africa Chair is a project of the [Hillcrest Aids Centre Trust](#) (HACT), situated in KwaZulu-Natal.

The chair has become a nationally recognised initiative that has warmed the hearts of South Africans and given them the license to express their expectations and raise their hopes for the future. Some may even be inspired to go on and take action to bring their dreams to life.

## **Unleashing South African dreams**

About eight years ago, the HACT launched the highly successful [Woza Moya](#) (Zulu, meaning "Come Holy Spirit") income generation project to help women affected by HIV/Aids to earn a living. KwaZulu-Natal is one of South Africa's provinces that is most affected by HIV/Aids.

A study titled [South African National HIV Prevalence, HIV Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey 2008](#) (PDF, 655KB) reveals that between 2002 and 2008, KwaZulu-Natal had the highest HIV prevalence in the country.

The original purpose of the chair was to draw more visitors to the Woza Moya stand at the 2010 [Design Indaba](#) , an annual conference and exhibition that brings together designers, architects, crafters, artists and other creative talents from all over the world.

Besides showcasing their jewellery and small crafts at Design Indaba, Woza Moya wanted to create something spectacular to help raise funds of R1.5-million (US\$214 000) for a new craft centre.

Paula Thomson, who runs the project, described the dream chair as a revolutionary idea. “We realised that the women in the project had stopped dreaming about the future and we were saddened by this. Their circumstances, being HIV positive and living in poverty, didn’t leave much room for dreaming anymore,” she said.

This thinking led to the creation of the “talking” chair. The entire chair, except the painted arms and legs, is adorned with beautiful handmade beadwork. Every woman in the project was asked to put her personal dream into the little beaded pieces that would become the chair’s patchwork upholstery.

Thomson and the team envisaged that the wings attached to the chair would resemble wire angel wings. However, a German volunteer at the project came up with a much better idea – he constructed the wings from wood in the shape of the African continent, giving the chair a local twist on the classic wingback style.

The next challenge was to find a suitable chair. “I was just walking past a skip bin one day and I saw four chair legs sticking out of it,” Thomson said. She rescued an old broken chair from the skip, it was glued back together and local upholsters were tasked with patching it up.

The chair has now become a metaphor for the women who come into the project. “They come

in broken and damaged and by working together there is transformation within.”

After the chair’s first appearance at the Design Indaba in February earlier this year, it has toured the country.

Thomson and Claudia Krumhoff, HACT marketing and public relations officer, and photographers Peter Upfold and Matthew Willman have visited many South African towns and cities. Every person who sits in the chair and shares their dreams adds to the character of this work of art.

The photographers have generously donated their time and creative input to take photographs of anyone who wants to sit in the chair and share their dreams.

Wherever it goes, people are curious about the chair. “The good thing about the chair is that it also connects people to HIV/Aids in a non-threatening way,” Thomson said.

### **South Africans can take a seat**

HACT staff and patients in the respite care unit were the first to receive the honour of sitting in the chair. Thomson said that although some of the patients were too weak to walk, they still insisted on being carried to the chair.

“This was an incredible experience because it was as if their dignity had been restored.”

Many local celebrities and South African icons have since been photographed in the chair: Archbishop Emeritus [Desmond Tutu](#) , cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro (famous as [Zapiro](#) ), local band [Fr eshlyground](#) , radio personality DJ Fresh, musicians [Lira](#)

and

[Johnny Clegg](#)

, and actors

[Leon Schuster](#)

and Shorty, to name but a few.

Claire Johnston, vocalist of the ever-popular South African band [Mango Groove](#), was recently photographed in the chair. She was amazed by its detail.

"So much work and care had gone into making it; so much human feeling, which is what makes an object special. I was told that the chair had a certain magical quality, and that people who saw it were drawn to it and wanted to sit in it," Johnston said.

She also said that the chair has come to represent something very powerful: "It is definitely a symbol of what we all have in common, what unites as opposed to divides. I want to be like the chair - positive, bright and full of possibility!"

The support of high profile South Africans is invaluable to the Dream Chair project, said Thomson, but it is also important to photograph ordinary South Africans, especially those who are doing outstanding work in their communities.

Jessica Foord from Hillcrest is one such example. She survived a gang rape while walking with her father at a dam near Hillcrest in 2008. Foord didn't want to remain a victim, so she established the [Jes Foord Foundation](#) to help people restore their lives after rape, to raise community awareness about rape, and also to support victims' friends and families.

## **South Africans' dreams**

"We get to hear everyone's innermost dreams. People have even asked if they can have two or three dreams. This shows that to some extent, we have all stopped dreaming," Thomson said. There is no limit to the type of dream people can express, whether it's for themselves, their communities or for the country.

The dreams that South Africans have shared reflect the diversity of the country. They have been funny, uplifting, thought-provoking and unexpected.

A mother from Khayelitsha in the Western Cape dreams of clean water for her children who are always sick; a three-year-old girl wants to be teen television character Hannah Montana; a young boy wishes to become a successful businessman and make his parents proud; and another South African would like wealth to be distributed more evenly in the country.

While taking the chair to Robben Island, Thomson encountered a man on a Cape Town wharf whose dream was that South Africa would overcome its biggest stumbling block of people not talking to each other any more.

### **Bursting at the seams**

Woza Moya is currently housed in a garage, but is in need of a craft centre to inspire the women to come in and work. The garage also houses a sewing and pottery project and the venue is bursting at the seams. Although it is an incredible hub of creativity, said Thomson, the project is now at the stage where it needs larger facilities.

Over 300 crafters are involved in the project. The team helps every woman who comes in to identify a creative skill such as beading, quilting, embroidery or sewing, which she can use to earn an income. The body of crafters grows every week, but infrastructure constraints are making it difficult to accommodate more women.

A R1.5-million injection would make it possible to enlarge the craft room, build a second storey and do other renovations. Last year the centre raised R3-million (\$428 000) for the crafters. "This proves that our crafters are at the centre of everything we do," Thomson said.

### **Getting involved**

Anyone can hire the chair at a daily rate to photograph it on their premises. Many companies are hiring it as part of their strategic planning meetings as well as brand and team building

sessions. Any photo shoot with the chair can be tailor-made to an organisation's needs. The rate includes a set of postcards, which can be customised with the customer's logo, and extras may be bought for an additional fee.

Prints of South Africans, celebrities and community leaders who have already been photographed in the chair can be ordered and prices vary depending on the size of the image. An extensive catalogue of the postcards, as well as rates, is available [online](#).

Woza Moya also sells dream-themed items such as tablemats, handbags and notepads directly from their craft shop in Hillcrest. They plan to soon release a coffee table book of all the photographs and dreams.

Thomson hopes that the Dreams for Africa photo exhibition will raise more awareness of HIV/Aids in South Africa. "We've never really met anyone that hasn't been moved by the chair," she said. "It has been on an incredible journey and it just makes you feel connected to South Africa again."

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