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Seeff

Office (021) 557 8390
blouberg@seeff.com

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CAPE COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS



Winter's wrath

■ Heavy swells battered the remnants of the Seli 1 as extreme weather closed in on Cape Town at the weekend. The storms threw gale-force winds, rain squalls and torrents of hail at the city and caused chaos and widespread flood damage. Roofs were blown off homes, thousands were left homeless, three people died and at least 30 accidents were recorded.

PICTURE: COLIN BROWN

Call to free knowledge

Wikipedia has filmed a documentary about pupils from a Joe Slovo high school who are taking on cellphone giants and asking them for free access on their phones to the online encyclopedia.

FAATIMAH HENDRICKS

The world's most popular online encyclopedia is shining the spotlight on a Joe Slovo high school by highlighting the pupils' fight to have free access to the website to improve their schoolwork.

The Wikimedia Foundation is a non-profit organisation which runs the popular Wikipedia encyclopedia website. They filmed a documentary about a Grade 12 class at Sinenjongo High School that wrote an open letter to cellphone network providers.

They asked the networks to allow all pupils to have free access to Wikipedia to make it easier for them to access information for their schoolwork.

The children wrote the letter

late last year but have since not received a response from any of the networks.

Instead, the Wikimedia Foundation stumbled across it online and contacted the school. The foundation's storyteller and fundraiser, Victor Grigas, started communicating with one of the teachers at the school, Pam Robertson, through email.

He got to learn more about the school and the pupils, their living conditions and why they were lobbying for cellphone companies to waive data charges when accessing Wikipedia from their cellphones.

Mr Grigas flew to Cape Town last month from America to shoot and produce a documentary.

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Joe Slovo pupils call for free Wikipedia

From page 1

One of the pupils who wrote the letter, Sinombongo Macekiswayo, said they had to walk long distances to the library. She said the pupils used Wikipedia often when researching school projects.

"Wikipedia to us is a reliable source because it is updated and the information is clear," she said. "We can get answers to every topic that we research."

Sinombongo hopes the documentary will encourage network providers to heed the pupils' appeal.

"The whole world will be able to see our story. Maybe the network providers will see the things we experience, and maybe they will realise we need Wikipedia for free."

Sinombongo said most of the children have cellphones, but they cannot always afford airtime. She said children throughout South Africa should have free access to Wikipedia.

"Wikipedia will really have a positive impact on the education system in SA. If we are finding Wikipedia reliable, I am sure there are other pupils who will find it useful."

Ms Robertson said while pupils in Joe Slovo lived in poverty, which affected their access to educational resources, others in rural parts of the country were far worse off. She has taught in rural schools where there are far fewer resources.

"If schools in rural areas could have free access to Wikipedia, it would make a tremendous difference," said Ms Robertson. She said Sinenjongo pupils had been excited to have the Wikimedia Foundation team shining a light on their plight.

"It makes them feel very special. I just hope it wins something at the end of the day, not only for these kids but so that kids all over can benefit."

Mr Grigas said all the content on Wikipedia was available to the public for free. People might use it, distribute it and even sell it, provided that credited the authors.

There are about 100 000 active editors who are all volunteers. Anybody can edit and contribute content to the



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site. Some of the 161 paid staff monitor all updates.

Mr Grigas studied film and video production at Columbia College in Chicago. He started volunteering for Wikipedia in 2005. He was permanently employed about two years ago. When he was a college student, he discovered Wikipedia and decided to experiment by entering "garbage". He noticed 15 minutes later that his post was deleted. He discovered there were people monitoring his entries. Mr Grigas realised that he could actually write an entire encyclopedia, and that's when he started contributing to the website as a volunteer.

He said there were representatives of Wikipedia flying all over the world to meet with network providers and get them to waive data fees for people using the site.

He said cellphone providers should look at the bigger picture.

"From a business perspective, you will have educated people who can improve your business. They should look at giving that little bit away for bigger potential."

Mr Grigas said the Wikimedia Foundation was clear on its goals.

"Since we are non-profit, our goals are clear: to get you all the



■ Filmmakers Charlene Music, left, and Victor Grigas



■ Filmmaker Charlene Music interviews Lutho Tshambo with his cellphone.

educational materials you need for free."

He first heard about Sinenjongo High School's open letter in February, and was emotional when he received a response after emailing the school for information. He said there were similarities between his own background and his father's and the upbringing of the pupils.

"After the second paragraph, I just started crying," he said. "They come from very bad living conditions and they've realised education is the way out. They have very determined and disciplined teachers at the school who are determined for them to get an education."

Mr Grigas told his manager he simply had to go to Cape Town and make a documentary about Sinen-

jongo High School. He brought with him another filmmaker, Charlene Music, and a volunteer contributor from Botswana, Oarabile Mudongo.

They do not yet know how long the documentary will be and where it will air.

"We're here to give these kids a voice," said Mr Grigas.

The team spent every day with the children, getting to know them and filming them at school and at home.

They left for Johannesburg on Saturday June 1 to meet a former A-student of Sinenjongo High School who is studying there.

Mr Mudongo, 21, is a networking engineer student at Botho University. He contributes articles and

educates others about Wikipedia. He won a scholarship to attend the Wikimania 2012 conference in Washington, DC. He will also be attending the Wikimania 2013 conference in Hong Kong in August.

Wikimania is an international conference where delegates discuss projects by the Wikimedia Foundation, open-source software, free knowledge and free content.

Mr Mudongo said about three months ago an internet service provider enabled free access to Wikipedia throughout Botswana.

"Many students are not aware of Wikipedia. I dedicate my time educating people on Wikipedia," said Mr Mudongo. "Students can now access Wikipedia pages and pictures for free in the country."

The Plan Specialist
Plans drawn for all additions and alterations

Dave H
ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

Contact David: 083 348 0394, 021 557 7330
daveh@theplanspecialist.co.za
Website: www.theplanspecialist.co.za
Find me here every week

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