



Samantha Louis

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Approximately 35 kilometres from Oudtshoorn, shadowed by the spectacular Cango Caves, is the small township of De Rust. The 7,000 people who live there are predominantly seasonal farm workers. Poverty, unemployment, and alcohol abuse are some of the many problems burdening the people who call De Rust home.

Sonstraal Voorskool, the area's Christian preschool, is a shining light for the many families whose children attend the school. Not only are their children prepared for the challenges of primary school, but the teachers in charge love their pupils and believe in their ability to succeed beyond the boundaries of the small town.

One such teacher is Samantha Louis. This 22 year-old single mother of two understands the challenges of growing up in De Rust. "I always wanted to be a teacher, but I fell pregnant in Grade 11. I managed to finish matric, but there was no money to go to college," Samantha explains. However, financial struggles didn't stop her from pursuing her love for the education sector. "I used to teach at

Sunday school and loved it, so I decided to become a preschool teacher."

Samantha is currently in charge of the three and four-year old group, and has been teaching at Sonstraal for three years. "When I started teaching I realised that I would need to further my education so that I could be the best teacher for the children." Since she started her early childhood development training at the Klein Karoo Resource Centre, Samantha has completed her ECD Level One and Four courses, a course in basic computer literacy, and a victim support programme. "Klein Karoo has been so helpful to me. When I go there I feel like I am at home." she says. Samantha explains how her teachers at the Resource Centre helped her to develop her self-esteem and become more extroverted in the playroom. "They go out of their way to help us. I enjoyed studying so much that I am busy completing my Level Five," Samantha laughs.

Due to her recent training Samantha says she now feels better equipped to

communicate with the children and their parents. "I arrive at school first everyday and I talk to the parents when they drop their children off. We have a very good relationship, and the parents take turns starting the morning with a bible reading."

Despite her optimism in the classroom, Samantha admits that living and working in De Rust has many challenges. "The parents struggle to find work so they often don't pay school fees on time. Many of the families are so poor that they live off the child support grants they receive." Samantha explains that alcohol and substance abuse is a constant reality for her community. "People get drunk here all the time, especially the young kids," she sighs. "It's because the kids have nothing to do here, so they get drunk on the weekend and cause trouble."

Samantha is quick to share what she loves most about preschool teaching. "When I see their faces in the morning and the light in their eyes as they learn new things, then I know why I love my job. The children just want to please you. They always try to do their best."



Samantha is so committed to the education of children in De Rust that she volunteers at the local primary school from two o'clock until five o'clock each afternoon. "After the preschool closes for the day, I help the children with their school work. I'm a teacher's assistant there, and I really enjoy it. Hopefully, I might get paid for it soon."

The issue of finance is something Samantha is reluctant to complain about. "I don't do it for the money," she explains. However, she admits that she struggles to look after her two small children on the R1,000 per month that she is paid. "It is very hard. I don't know how we would survive if we didn't live with my Gran." When asked what she believes an adequate salary would be, Samantha is modest and says R2,500 per month would be enough. "I'm not trying to be greedy," she adds.

At her school, only two teachers have their ECD Level Four qualification. "Teachers must be encouraged to get their qualification," Samantha says. "Teachers don't want to do their practical work without being paid, but I had to do that. We need good teachers."

As our conversation draws to a close, Samantha says that her greatest wish is for those in the Education Department to come and visit her small community. "They must see the problems we face and help us. No one comes here," she sighs. "We only want the best for our children. We are trying to lay the foundation for the rest of their lives."

Sonstraal Voorskool, De Rust

