



Project: Operation Smile

Alete Wege

"Lucas, your face is leaking!" says Hova.

"Is that what humans do when they are sad?"

From 'The Ant Bully'

Each year at the annual SAAHIP conference, each SAAHIP branch pledges a donation in support of *Operation Smile*. My first SAAHIP conference was in 2015 and I was impressed with the way in which delegates supported this very worthy cause. At the 2016 SAAHIP conference, I felt a tug in my soul. By the end of the conference I knew I would like to do some kind of fund raiser for the 2017 Conference.

SAAHIP Western Cape branch was the organising branch for the 2017 conference and the organising committee agreed that I could add *Operation Smile* to my responsibilities. Fellow committee member Renier Coetzee created the *flash card* that we were to use on Twitter and WhatsApp for the campaign.



I went onto the *Operation Smile* website to find before-and-after photographs to show at the conference. This was an eye opener. It was heart breaking to see the images of young adult males that had lived with a cleft palate into their 20's and only then were blessed with surgery thanks to *Operation Smile*. Kids are so cruel. Just imagine these young men growing up with a deformity. This in a third world country where people do not have access to information and are superstitious! Please go and have a look on the website! And be prepared: Your face WILL leak.

Our chair, Colleen Whitelaw, had created a WC delegates WhatsApp group. We shared the *flasher* on the group and on Twitter. I was unable to start the campaign until the Friday afternoon, 10 days before the conference. I used the delegates' WhatsApp group to get the fundraiser going. I called it **ONE SMILE** as R5 500 would pay for one smile. I thought that this was a reachable goal. I opened the pledges with R100. Fellow delegates followed suite. Delegates campaigned at their facilities and the money started coming in. The Smile Meter got stuck at around R4 500. I was not disheartened as we only needed R1000

to reach the **ONE SMILE** goal. In the interim I had created a broadcast group and the contacts got regular updates. We were also supported by colleagues. THEN we had a pledge for R2 500 from a delegate! Well, as the Smile Meter now exceeded the initial goal it was changed to **TWO SMILES**. This was attainable! This boost was all we needed to be re-energised and once again gather momentum.

The WhatsApp messages kept coming in and colleagues, friends and family paid money into our fund account. Soon the Smile Meter exceeded R11 000 and it became a **THREE SMILES** campaign. I was sitting back to catch my breath as this was an emotionally exhausting task. I realised that the initial goal of **ONE SMILE** was too small a goal. I had hopelessly underestimated the generosity of South Africans!

We had contributions ranging from R5 to R2 500. And believe me, every rand counts! No contribution is insignificant. It was a wonderful feeling when the Smile Meter hit R16 500. The WhatsApp group was buzzing with excitement. It was wonderful to tell the *Operation Smile* ladies at the Western Cape offices that we will be paying over **THREE SMILES!** Thank you to all who contributed and to the delegates that campaigned at their different facilities. The group effort enabled us to pledge **THREE SMILES!**

"Yeah, we are small, but TOGETHER we are strong!"

From "The Ant Bully"

In total, SAAHIP delegates raised R 55 000 which will pay for 10 smiles! Well done, delegates.

Siyabonga's Smile

When Siyabonga was handed to his mother shortly after his birth she admits to being scared by his appearance. Siyabonga was born with a cleft lip and Athalia had never seen anything like it before.

Fortunately the doctors and nurses were able to explain that the condition was correctable and that there would actually be an *Operation Smile* mission taking place at the very same hospital later in the year.

Athalia contacted *Operation Smile South Africa (OSSA)* and she was advised to attend the mission held in Mbombela in September 2015. In the interim she returned home with her baby boy and faced a community confused and afraid. "My community asked why he looked this way, they didn't understand. They were scared and wanted to



Athalia and Siyabonga

know how he would end up in life," remembers Athalia.

Apart from the challenge presented by the community's ignorance of cleft lip and palate Athalia's greatest barrier to care was the issue of transport and cost. Based around 90 minutes from the nearest town Athalia and Siyabonga live off the beaten track and so finding transport has proved problematic.

OSSA assisted the two in finding their way to the mission and Athalia admits a sense of relief upon arriving and seeing more children with the same condition as Siyabonga. "I was surprised, I thought it was only Siyabonga but it isn't," says Athalia.

Siyabonga was selected for surgery and although his mother was undeniably nervous she remained confident that all would go well. When she was reunited with Siyabonga, she could not believe her eyes. "I was so happy."

Six months later during a post-operative trip Athalia is still beaming with joy at the change in Siyabonga. He charges around the garden adjacent to their home and while Athalia says that he is by nature a shy child that since attending nursery school he has definitely come out of his shell.

When Athalia considers the confusion that her neighbours expressed after seeing the results of the surgery, "they thought his cleft had been fixed with flesh from his leg," she confirms that educating communities about cleft lip and/or palate is key.

For now though all she wants is for Siyabonga to be happy because she smiles, "the weight has been lifted."



Siyabonga's new smile