

Cutting and sewing brings Africa to the world: social justice for older people

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Abstract

Older people are marginalized and are often subjected to discrimination and injustice. Yet they have a wealth of experience, wisdom, and skills that they can contribute. This story describes a project where a group of older women made tote bags for a symposium. The story unfolds from initial contact with the group to the bags being taken from Africa to the rest of the world. The reciprocal gratitude and the achievement of social justice, even on a small scale, proves that it is possible to make the world a better place.

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Do we see older people as a marginalized group with no prospects who cannot make any contribution to society? Or do we see the wisdom, experience, skills and resilience when we encounter older people? In 2015 I accompanied a colleague to a community project center with which our university was involved. Being a lecturer who daily interacts with young adults I had my reservations on our way to the project. My preconceived idea was that I would encounter people with failing health, dementia and decreased well-being. And my perceptions were exaggerated by the fact that the older people who we were to meet had low socio-economic living conditions and very little or no monthly income. This would surely have an added negative effect on their aging I thought.

When we arrived at the center and walked to the building entrance, I heard singing and saw people planting, hoeing and watering a small flourishing vegetable garden. My inner voice paused. Here were people chatting away, singing, laughing, reminiscing, planning church activities, discussing the grandchildren. This was my first impression of the groups of older people at the Kukanang Project Centre for the Elderly in the Mamelodi Township near Pretoria in South Africa. The Kukanang Project Centre is a drop-in center for older people providing a safe environment with several stimulating activities five days a week. People can join a choir, participate in a vegetable garden project, make beaded African jewelry and join a sewing group. A nourishing warm meal is served at lunch time followed with a cup of tea.

On a tour around the center, we were greeted by friendly, warm and amenable faces. The further I walked, the guiltier I felt for my own stereotypes of older people. However, in less than fifteen minutes, my perceptions changed. What a wealth of experience we

had in this group? And my immediate reaction was that we should use this to show the world how wrong injustice toward older people is and that we should support their initiatives.

I am fond of sewing and creating something from fabric. Needless to say that I got stuck with the sewing group. The group of women eagerly showed me their items and the bonding and mutual aid within the group was tangible. Shirts, girls' dresses and curtains in bright African fabrics were proudly displayed. Over my shoulder hung a bag that I received at a conference earlier that year. It was a plain blue bag made from synthetic fabric and at the bottom, my keys already chafed away a small hole. Looking at the vibrant colorful fabrics and items and holding them in my hand, feeling the strength of the fabric, a Eureka moment followed! What if we could convince organizations who have conferences and meetings that this group can make and supply conference bags that would be strong and serve multiple purposes? What if we could assist this group to sell their products for an extra income?

The Eureka moment must have been visible in a big smile and splurge of energy in non-verbal gestures. The group invited me to join them. I shared my idea. We dissected the synthetic bag to copy the pattern and the group unanimously agreed that it would be easy to make bags from African fabric. From a sceptic prejudiced outsider, I moved to being a new included group member. Group members started talking about their children and grandchildren and their daily activities. They explained the functioning of the center and what it meant to drop in and sit together in small groups participating in their chosen activities.

New ideas often stay at the thought and are not taken forward. But the passion and energy of the group was contagious. This could not just stay as a mere thought of something vaguely possible and as an empty promise. Characteristic of this age group and the African context, the group asked to pray that some organization would buy into our proposal and set the project off. They were very eager to embark on the venture and I had to promise to update them on every step. I left with humility and gratitude for the opportunity to meet with and be accepted by the group.

That evening, I wrote a proposal to the International Association of Social Work with Groups (IASWG). IASWG aims for outreach and for diversity. Embracing diversity, I submitted the proposal to make the symposium (tote) bags for the XXXVII Annual Symposium of the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG), in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in June 2015. The proposal explained that we would register a research project on group work and social enterprise. The project would be facilitated at the Kukanang Project Centre for the Elderly and we would expand it to a project for the homeless to address social and economic development.

The proposal explained that the bags are made of Shweshwe, a printed dyed cotton fabric widely used for traditional South African clothing. Originally dyed indigo, the fabric is made in a variety of colors and printing designs characterized by elaborate geometric patterns. Due to its timeless popularity, Shweshwe has been described as the denim, or tartan, of South Africa. The group would use the exact pattern and dimensions (42cm x 35 cm) of the bags for a previous symposium. Another group could make African felt animals that they attach to the bags that can be used as a key holder.

The proposal was sent off and the waiting started. A couple of emails followed on the logistics of costs, payment and delivering the bags and then the final approval came! What joy! Rushing off to the center, I could hardly contain my excitement. Was it this much fun and enjoyment to embark on addressing issues of social justice? Older people are discriminated against, they are labelled as being dependent and a burden to families and societies. Yet here was an opportunity to join forces and use the strengths and capacities of a group of older women with a passion for life and what they are doing. “If we do not try, we will never know”, reverberated through my mind. Arriving at the center, I ran to the sewing room and splashed the news. Ululations followed and we celebrated with tea and cookies. The journey began!

The group and I searched for affordable fabric and strong handles. This was the chance to take Africa to the world. We discovered a ribbon with the South African flag and decided that it would be fitting to attach a small ribbon to every bag to show the gratitude and pride in supplying the bags. The group quickly divided chores for cutting fabric, cutting the handles and the flag ribbon, sewing, and scrutinizing the product that would go with an *‘airplane over the sea’*. I joined the group regularly and participated in the conversations while they were busy making the bags. Discussions included stories about the ‘good old days’, sharing concerns about their children and grandchildren, sharing ideas for budget meals and making ends meet, talking about old friends. Never once did these group members complain about their circumstances and growing older. Meeting with the group was a highlight in my schedule. Even though this project aimed for exposure to the world and facilitating social and economic

development, I learned so much and sat wide-eyed waiting for the next anecdote and laughter.

Five months later we counted the bags, packed them and celebrated with tea and scones with jam and cream. What is a group without refreshments? Group members were very excited and sent me off with wishes to the “people of the America” that they hoped the bags would be in order and keep for a very long time; that the people should come to South Africa and see and experience the *Ubuntu* in the country (humanity toward others). They asked that I convey their gratitude for IASWG accepting the proposal to make the bags.

At the symposium, the colorful bags were embraced with joy, amazement and equal gratitude for receiving them as was the gratitude for making them. Together with three students, we presented a workshop on the project and had an experiential activity to show that group work combined with making an item with one’s hands, is fulfilling and creates avenues for conversation that may not have been possible with a mere discussion only using words. Symposium attendees reciprocally sent messages to the group of women of how beautiful the bags were and how they appreciated every stitch and every effort.

This small project is a story of making the world a better place. The group continued to make bags. Orders were received from the Netherlands and Germany and IASWG again ordered bags for two symposiums. The Kukanang Project Centre for the Elderly has a Facebook page where bags can be ordered. Although on a small scale, social justice was and is achieved through this project in numerous ways. The distribution of

money and an extra income supplementing very meagre government grants assist in making ends meet. Including the older people in a project that creates awareness of their contexts enhances their well-being through their participation in an internationally recognized project. To experience how this project impacted the self-worth of the group members, was and still is a transforming and revitalizing encounter. The rights of older people are highlighted through equity, access and participation.

Kukanang is an African name meaning '*Uplift each other*'. The world of Africa, South Africa and the people of the Kukanang Centre becomes a better place with every colorful African fabric bag made with care and enthusiasm having a usage, function and purpose somewhere in the rest of the world. The purpose and role of group members in life and society is enhanced and highlighted. Social justice asks for activism and challenging stereotypes and perceptions. This story proves that it is possible and that we all have a duty to pursue social justice.