

Township children take up sailing

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HAVING FUN: The group of Touwsranteen students at the lakeside with instructor Evelyn Osborne (back row right).

ISLAND Lake near Wilderness is the scene of concentrated nautical activity for most of the year with power boats, water skiers and wake boarders vying for space with flotillas of yachts from the George Lakes Yacht Club.

Occasionally, in a quiet and shallow corner of the lake there is a gathering of tiny, single sail boats crewed by children from nearby townships experiencing their first exposure to the vagaries of wind-powered boating.

Under the watchful eye of experienced sail trainer Evelyn Osborne and helpers, up to 30 children are taught how sailing boats work, knot tying and the rules of the water in a classroom session before heading out to the lake to hone their swimming skills and try hands-on sailing.

Evelyn and friends volunteer their time, skills and equipment free of charge in an effort to aid youth education and development in the rural villages of the Garden Route.

"We contribute our time as part of an established programme, called The Seven Passes Initiative (TSPI), which is funded partly by provincial

government in conjunction with major dairy farms Lancewood and Mandalay, where many of the parents of the children are employed.

"The use of alcohol and drugs due to the boredom and isolation in the three remote schools and villages involved can often lead to dysfunctional families and crime. The TSPI allows the children to experience uplifting activities away from their isolated existence and encourages them to break this vicious cycle," she said.

According to Evelyn the programme works towards long term poverty alleviation through raising the educational level of the community and includes homework clubs and other educational activities.

"We treat the whole session in a light-hearted but thoroughly professional way and ensure that, before the kids are allowed out on the water, they understand the principles of sailing. We teach them to always wear a life-jacket and how to extricate themselves from dangerous situations."

The training classes use four two-metre long Optimist yachts, each of which carries two children. They are taught how to recognise wind direction, how to steer, tack and what to do in a 'man overboard' situation.

Diminutive 12-year-old Jessamy van Beulen soon mastered the techniques and enthused about her recent sailing experiences.

"It was really lekker and I'd love to do it again if I can. I was just a little scared but now I know how a boat works," she said.

Evelyn said she enjoyed contributing her time to this cause to see the children's appreciation.

"They come here to the waterside, often for the first time, and the trepidation is apparent on their faces. But it is so rewarding to see the same kids two hours later confidently piloting their vessel around a course, having conquered their fear of the unknown."