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NEWPORT BEACH BUSINESSMAN STEVE TUCKER AIMS TO ANSWER NELSON MANDELA'S CALL TO AID SOUTH AFRICANS WITH HIS HELP! SA LITERACY PROGRAM

by Ana Figueroa
photography opposite by Bob Hodson

It's a long way from the slums of Soweto to the Big Canyon Country Club in Newport Beach. But businessman Steve Tucker is using his success in one world to help the other. For the last three years, the Newport Beach resident has worked to bring literacy to South Africa through a program he developed called HELP! SA.

Tucker's energy and enthusiasm for HELP!—an acronym for Hands-on English Literacy Program—is evident from the moment he bounds into the country club's dining room carrying boxes and binders of materials. Tucker, 58, has neatly trimmed gray hair, cheerful blue eyes, and the serious tan of a man who's spent a significant amount of time under the African sun. He is soft-spoken, yet passionate when he describes his South African venture, which began in 1997 when Tucker heard Nelson Mandela speak via satellite to an education conference in Aspen. Mandela told the assembled group of businesspeople and politicians that South Africa desperately needed three things: health care, housing, and literacy. Of the three, said Mandela, literacy was the most pressing need for a population still reeling from apartheid.

For Tucker, Mandela's speech was a clarion call, combining two areas of interest and expertise. Twenty years of sponsoring villages in Africa through the international relief organization World Vision had sensitized him to the needs of the continent. And Tucker also knew the world of literacy training. In the early 1990s, he was a founding investor and executive vice president of an educational company that promoted literacy through phonics. Before selling his interest in the business, Tucker had overseen it from inception to nearly \$50 million in sales. But Tucker had already made his fortune a decade earlier by inventing the first plastic air cargo container for jetliners. He also had founded and sold a Fountain Valley enterprise that made thermoplastic components for jets and conducted specialized work for Lockheed Martin and Boeing Company.

Tucker could easily have become a permanent fixture on the fairways of Big Canyon. Instead, he headed for South Africa. Inspired by Mandela, Tucker decided to use his background in business and phonics to do something for the South African people. Using his own resources, he met with South African teachers unions and other education officials, and began to develop a literacy program based on phonics. He soon discovered that the obstacles in his path were daunting.

"It's hard for people in the United States to understand how the whole apartheid regime held people down,"



Tucker says. "For all those years, they were not educated. If they were, the schools had 85 students, one teacher, and no books. Now they've put blacks in government jobs. But they're really struggling with their skills because they don't have the education. There are no jobs in Zulu or the 14 different bush languages. Everyone has to learn to read, write, and speak English."

After three years in development, Tucker launched HELP! SA. The program, now used in schools throughout the African country, teaches literacy through board games and cards using the phonics system. That's an advantage in a country where some children go to school in classrooms fashioned from 40-foot cargo containers. Computers and even electricity are luxuries.

MISSION TO AFRICA

There are two levels to the Help! SA program. Adventure Phonics, for children ages 3 to 7, is packaged like a Candyland game, with brightly colored animal characters in the shapes of elephants, zebras, and giraffes. A compact disc teaches children sounds, while a writing and coloring book teaches them how to write the alphabet. For adults, a Master English program provides cards, games, cassettes, and rulebooks. The board game format, says Tucker, makes



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— Steve Tucker,
literacy advocate

students tend to forget that they are learning. It encourages socialization, taking turns, and boosts self-esteem. “The reason our product is so successful is that it teaches spelling, reading, and comprehension,” says Tucker. “It also works very quickly.”

In fact, Help! SA boasts that it can provide basic English literacy in 40 hours. The claim seems difficult to believe until one reviews the slew of written and videotaped testimonials that Tucker proudly shows off. Recommendations from the National Professional Teachers’ Organisation of South Africa and the Department of Education laud

MISSION TO AFRICA

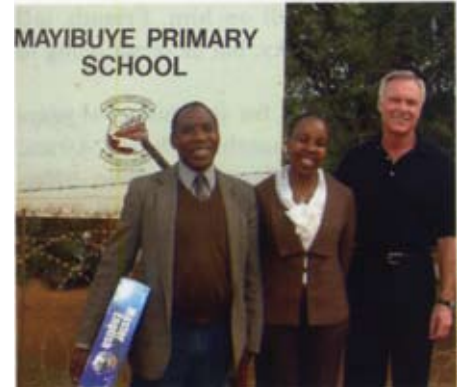
the program’s success. A video shows the gratitude of a 50-year-old woman who is able to read a newspaper for the first time in her life. A letter from a primary school principal reads: “You have planted a seed into the community. ... This seed will grow and the fruits of knowledge that it will bear will quench the hunger in our people.”

Tucker grows nearly emotional as he scans the binder full of documents. “South Africa is still very poor,” he notes. “Many of these schools are out in the bush, where these children come to school without breakfast or dinner. We’ve worked with the Twilight Children in Soweto. These are kids on the street, whose parents have died of AIDS. There is an organization that gives them clothes and food. What I’ve decided to do is give them an education.”

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— Steve Tucker

Finding the funding to expand HELP! SA is Tucker’s biggest challenge at the moment. He has set up two corporations: One is for-profit, the other a nonprofit. The for-profit arm sells the HELP! SA program to schools. The nonprofit arm, the Help Africa Foundation, is based in Santa Ana and solicits sponsorships to help cover the cost of the program in squatter-camp schools. IBM South Africa and other corporations already have sponsored schools, says Tucker. And large corporations operating in South Africa also have purchased the literacy program for their employees. “South Africa is rich in natural resources, but not in a skilled work force,” says Tucker. “The Department of Trade



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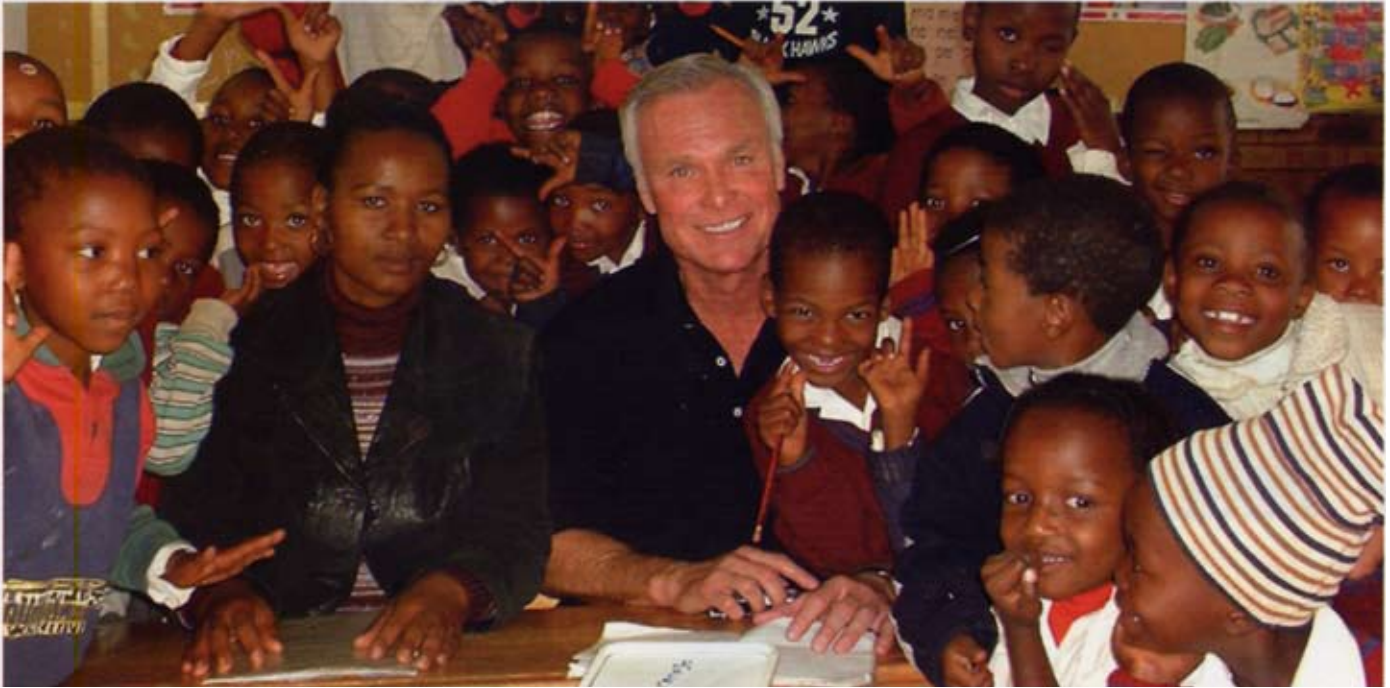
— Steve Tucker

and Industry is very interested in working with us. We’re trying to educate the adult labor force so that more business will come there.”

Tucker has not only used his own funds to develop the program, but he is maintaining operations in South Africa with a full-time staff of six, and the business has yet to show a profit. “It could be a successful business,” he says. “But in South Africa, because of apartheid, I can’t own the controlling interest in the company. As it becomes more successful, there has to be black ownership. I have to give away up to 51 percent, which means I will no longer control the corporation.”

He doesn’t seem fazed. It’s clear Tucker isn’t doing this for the money. “I get so many rewards. I see the expressions of the children when they are learning something. I’ve seen teachers weep, because now they have the tools to teach children and adults,” he says.

“Steve believes in what he is doing with all his heart,” says Newport Beach developer David Maffei, a friend of Tucker’s. “He comes back from spending time in South Africa, and he’s 20 pounds thinner. We’ve seen this work



MISSION TO AFRICA

take quite a toll on him. Friends tell him it is too risky, but he is not going to give up."

Tucker, who for the past few years has spent six months in South Africa, explains: "Different people have different callings. I happen to know that I've been called to go to South Africa, and to take this product throughout the continent of Africa."

"I think it is probably the most powerful tool that I've seen. ... It's something that I hope can be given to all African countries."

—Makena Marangu,
Orange County physician

Education officials in other countries, such as Namibia, Botswana, the Congo, and Kenya, have approached Tucker about expanding the program. He is particularly encouraged by a recent meeting with Kenyan-born Orange County physician Makena Marangu. Marangu, whose parents are a prominent university professor and university president in Kenya, has seen the HELP! SA program

in action and is quite impressed.

"I think it is probably the most powerful tool that I've ever seen," says Marangu. "It's something that I hope can be given to all African countries."

In the meantime, there are signs Tucker may be setting his sights a little closer to home. "People say, 'Why are you spending so much time in South Africa when our own inner-cities are in such a terrible state?'" says Tucker. An Orange County Sheriff's Department reservist, Tucker has been working with Sheriff Mike Corona and Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca to develop a literacy program for Latino inner-city children.

"Let's see if we can help these kids read and write English, so they can get a job and have some kind of future," says Tucker, who is of Latino and Irish ancestry. "I have a real passion for the continent of Africa. But now I feel I'm being called back here to see if I can help our own inner-city kids in conjunction with what I'm doing in Africa." **OC**

Ana Figueroa is a freelance writer from Whittier.

for more info

Interested in learning more about the Help Africa Foundation? Call the group at 949-756-8779, or send mail to 1800 East Garry Avenue, Suite 117, Santa Ana, 92705.