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Reaching out on the Internet

Programme connects SA Aids kids with US mentor families

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Every Tuesday and Thursday, Mpho Boleke (14) sits in front of a computer, logs on to a secure Internet site, and chats with her friend, Gail Harper (66), who lives thousands of kilometres away in America.

From strikingly different backgrounds – Boleke, a young girl who lives in a group home outside Johannesburg, and Harper, a suburban woman from a middle-class background in Pennsylvania – have forged an unlikely friendship that they hope will continue for a lifetime.

Boleke and "Aunty Gail", as she calls her, met earlier this year through a US programme called Infinite Family, which connects American individuals who donate \$40 (R270) a month and commit to at least a year of weekly conversations with disadvantaged young people in South Africa.

The donations do not go only towards the upkeep of the programme, but also towards projects for the community, birthday and Christmas presents for the children, and a savings account for the child that they can access once enough money accrues for tertiary education or to open a business.

Two pilot programmes were launched in Johannesburg at Nkos's Haven, an NGO that support Aids orphans, and Refilwe, an NGO that supports disadvantaged chil-

dren and local communities in need.

Although Boleke, who joined the programme earlier this year, lives at Refilwe with her mother and sister, she considers Harper a friend who she can tell all her deepest secrets.

"It is nice to know that I can share many secrets with her. I know that my secrets will be safe," said Boleke.

If the secrets become too harrowing, though, there is a chain of support put in place to insure that the child's safety is not compromised.

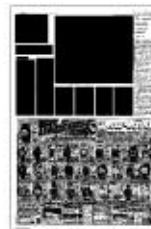
Mentors like Harper are trained to red-flag issues that may require extra support, calling in the American director of the programme.

If additional help is needed, the director will work with the head of the South African programme to find a solution.

Families of mentors in America go through an extensive screening process, followed by eight hours of training about South African culture and the needs of children, including Aids orphans from impoverished backgrounds.

Through local sponsors such as Internet Solution, Investec and Bombardier the New York-based Infinite Family provides video-conferencing equipment and upgrades for computers so that young people – many who are using a computer for the first time – can access their "net buddy" with the help of a video camera, headphones, and a microphone, as well as through instant messaging.

The concept was born when Amy



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□ Mpho Boleke (14), of the Refilwe community project in Lanseria, chats to her mentor family in the US via the Internet.

PICTURE: PABALLO THEKISO

Conrad Stokes, founder of Infinite Family, adopted her son from South Africa in 2003. With a background in working with teens in gang-infested areas in the United States, Stokes said she knew how significant a solid role model was for a troubled or neglected teenager.

"It is important for a teenager to have at least one adult in their life who can coach them through decisions they are making and to motivate them to invest in themselves through education and work experience," she said.

"It became clear to me that the United States had an asset we could share with the children in South Africa: caring adults who wished to share their experience and love."

More than 100 kids from South

Africa are currently involved with 55 American families, but Stokes said she hoped South African families could also become involved with the mentoring programme.

Stokes said that the face-to-face component of video conferencing was "critical to building personal bonds". "Direct communication includes smiles, laughter and other expressions that help mentors and teens learn about each other and share their lives together," she said.

And, in the case of Boleke and Harper, singing.

"Has Mpho sung for you yet?" asked Harper, who has never met Boleke in person, but who confidently added: "She has such a lovely voice. She sounds like an angel."

Boleke has also benefited by

learning about customs different to those celebrated in South Africa.

"She told me about Halloween. It is when people wear masks and costumes," she said.

Stokes said that despite the gaps in culture and backgrounds, the families involved found that there were more similarities than differences between SA and US teens.

"They all care about navigating relationships with their peers, are worried about getting ready for future jobs and responsibilities, love sports and music, and want to share what is special about themselves and their country," she said.

Next year Infinite Family hopes to extend the programme by bringing in other South African NGOs.

A new opportunity is also open-

ing up with the mentoring of children in their schooling. A scanner has been put in place at Refilwe for children to scan in their homework and ask for help from their mentors.

"They can't do the work for them, but they can explain how to do it - like a parent does for a child," said Piet Bakers, technical support guide at Refilwe.

But like any parent with a teenage child, there are bound to be some moments of rebellion. Lori Allison, a mentor from Pennsylvania, said of her net buddy: "She is warm, loving and thoughtful, but not afraid to giggle or roll her eyes to let me know when I have said something that is not cool. Apparently, what is old-fashioned in the US is also old-fashioned in South Africa."