

Wear the CHANGE

BY CHANDREA SEREBRO

LAUREN GILLIS IS WELL KNOWN IN CAPE TOWN AND OUT. A SOCIAL worker whose reputation as a do-gooder and a go-getter precedes her, I heard that over and above everything she does, she is also training for the New York Marathon in November (not her first time doing it, I might add). Now, as you have read in many of my previous articles, I vacillate between being a lover of running, and well, let's just say, extremely irritated by runners in general, so I really wanted to figure out how she fits it all in and still manages to do so much. At least then I could decide for myself which of my 'not-very-articulate-but-at-least-I-am-honest-with-you' categories she fits into.

It was then that I heard she was assisting a severely mentally challenged girl to complete the marathon with her, part of a group of differently-abled athletes representing 'Achilles SA', and well, I was sold. Lauren has placed herself firmly in the 'I'm amazed at everything you do' category, blurring the boundaries between doing good – as co-founder and champion of the not-for-profit social enterprise Relate Bracelets – and self-aspiration, helping runners excel where they might have otherwise thought they couldn't, as her personal goal. And she didn't fail to live up to these expectations.

"Some say that I lead a selfless life, but for me it is quite the reverse; it's a rather selfish one, in fact. Although less privileged people have benefited from my ideas and dedicated time, I am certainly the one who has gained the most. I am the one living with a beautiful feeling of purpose and meaning. It certainly is a gift when one has the opportunity to dedicate one's life to others."

She explains that the Hebrew word 'venatnu', to give, is a palindrome – one that reads the same in both directions. The Torah describes that giving and receiving go hand-in-hand, and this is why she feels that the life she has chosen, of doing good and giving back, is a rich, meaningful life that she wouldn't trade in. "From a young age, I was exposed to parents who were involved in community work. In their world, focusing on others was a given; and social work as a career was a natural choice for me. When working as a newly qualified social worker, I started training blind runners." The experience, she says, of taking people from a world in which they felt inadequate and worthless, making baskets in a civilian blind workshop, to successfully completing the Comrades Marathon and being employed in the open labour market, fed her soul, giving her a sense of hope and purpose.

"There cannot be a greater feeling than the one generated from creating an opportunity for another and helping them



thought, a belief in that thought, a time-defined goal, and lots of hard work for you to reach your goal. "Training for and completing a marathon is a metaphor for life. It teaches you that anything is possible.

"Whether it has been creating an opportunity for a physically or mentally challenged person to experience success, build confidence and reach their potential, or whether it is through the work we do at Relate Bracelets, it is all focused on giving dignity to others and making their lives a little easier and more meaningful." Relate is 100% not-for-profit, and is run like a business, except the profit does not financially enrich the shareholders. Instead, the profit goes to organisations and people that need it most. It is based on an effective and sustainable model that uses a simple beaded bracelet as tool.

Without even realising it, most of you are probably familiar with Relate beaded bracelets that support different causes – they are the ones which always have an R bead on them, which is their trusted stamp, their stamp of accountability and transparency. One-third of the wholesale price is donated to other causes and NPOs, but what many people do not know is the impact of another third. This third focuses on creating earning opportunities for young and elderly people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and every bracelet also results in investment in skills and enterprise development. Who would have thought that in less than four years, this tool could raise approximately R18 million for organisations and social upliftment through the sale of over a million bracelets? Isn't it mind-boggling that a simple string of beads could be a solution to so many of our country's challenges?

Grateful for the support of many retailers like Woolworths and Clicks, now there is a need for customers to understand who and what Relate is all about, and to join the movement for change and to "wear the change they want to see".

"I am forever inspired by my hero Nelson Mandela, and in his words. 'What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.' This to me is the epitome of venatnu." ■