

# Asking life's most important questions

Julian Hewitt

**M**EAN-SPIRITED TEACHERS who could easily have starred as Charles Dickens' Scrooge character, bullying at the hands of learners whose facial hair was already profuse by Grade 6, initiation activities that would not be out of place in the army and the all-too-frequent trouser-warming sessions in the headmaster's office – these seem to be all-too-common reactions when stirring up memories of someone's schooling experience.

Given that I spent all of 12 years at school, I have often wondered about the role of education in shaping who and where I am today. In a world where bookshelves cry out for attention with motivational, spiritual and leadership bestsellers, it is quite satisfying to feel that I made that connection to my purpose early on.

While the school I went to was far from a leading one in academic, sporting or cultural greatness, there is something truly exciting that has emerged from the small group of 54 classmates who matriculated with me.

In the 13 years since that day, when, with immense relief, we wrote the last letter on the last word of the last exam, an amazing abundance of talent has blossomed in my fellow pupils.

There is a horticulturalist managing 300 people in London, a former television presenter, a comedian who starred in a long-running soap opera, an accountant in the Cayman Islands, a doctor running an entire hospital in East London, a geologist exploring Africa's subterranean riches, a music lecturer at the University of Cape Town, a corporate executive working at a leading multinational, an MBA graduate-to-be, a computer programming expert, as well as a healthy sprinkling of budding entrepreneurs.

These are far from the staid and more socially acceptable doctors, lawyers and accountants who seem to come so frequently from the upper echelons of South Africa's leading educational institutions.

I myself embarked on a whirlwind of profound and deeply rewarding activities since matriculating in 1996. This included a stint as a sports coach at a leading Oxford preparatory school and travelling around most of Western Europe before my 18th birthday. These activities flowed into heading up the local, national and regional office of the world's largest student organisation, receiving international leadership recognition in the process. My journey has taken me to more than 40 countries and given me the privilege of meeting individuals such as President Bill Clinton and his wife, then Senator Hillary Clinton, President Thabo Mbeki and his wife, Zanele Mbeki, Senator Ted Kennedy and many leading business and social leaders.

My passion for being at the forefront of social change has seen my involvement in founding three non-profit organisations, the latest of which is a leading professional volunteering initiative that has helped bridge the skills and capacity gap between 25 under-resourced Gauteng schools, with more than 300 corporate volunteers since its inception five years ago. More recently, my wife and I returned from a three-year stint in Mainland China, where I received a Chinese government scholarship to study Mandarin at Shanghai University.

Currently, my job is finding and selecting up to 100 of Southern Africa's brightest young entrepreneurial talents for full university scholarships each year – offering support, mentoring and providing access to R1-billion in venture capital through the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation.

In all this, I owe my parents so much. Theirs was a tough life to give my sister and I every opportunity for success. My dad religiously came to each and every sports match and my mum ignited my entrepreneurial enthusiasm and curiosity.

But much credit must also go to my distinctive schooling experience – at a small, Catholic school in Port Elizabeth that many local residents remain unaware of. It was a different place, in that it fully embraced multi-racialism more than half a century ago. My class was as demographically diverse as our country is.

This was further supported by passionate teachers and an incredibly personalised learning environment. While it might not have reached the heights of academic and sporting prowess, this space gave my classmates and I the ability to confidently ask some of life's most important questions: what are the needs of the world, what I am passionate about, and where do these answers intersect?

It is here that the foundations for my and my ex-classmates' callings were laid.

*Julian Hewitt, 30, attended St Dominic's Priory and Trinity High School. He is happily married, and is father to a 10-month-old daughter.*



*Julian Hewitt and his 10-month-old daughter*