

# She's making sure dogs have something to wag their tails about

Trish Murphy

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At the Bapsfontein informal settlement, south-east of Pretoria, there are dogs that were once ridden with mange and worms. Some were suffering from untreated injuries. Some were having litter after litter of puppies, many of which succumbed to biliary or distemper.

There were dogs kept on short chains with no water and nothing but a sheet of corrugated iron on which to sleep through winter. Dogs kept in tiny cages, their only purpose in life to act as a burglar alarm.

Many of those same dogs are now healthy, sterilised and living in improved conditions. Their circumstances were not a result of deliberate neglect – their owners care as best they can for them, but in a place of acute poverty where there is insufficient money to clothe children or send them to school, dogs aren't given high priority.

What has changed the lives of these dogs is the dedication of Merinda Brits, who runs the animal welfare non-profit organisation 4Paws.

Brits goes into the settlements, talks to people, deworms and inspects the dogs, takes them to Animals in Distress for veterinary treatment or sterilisation where needed, and then returns them to their owners, collects puppies to be rehomed, rescues abandoned animals and does it all *mahala mahala*, at no cost, as she explains to the residents. She also works to educate people in proper animal care.

Brits initially worked for CLAW, an animal welfare organisation doing much the same job, but found she was more effective when operating on her own, with the assistance of Doctor Lebaka (Doctor is his name, not a title), her employee.

Bapsfontein is a dusty place where most adults are elderly or unemployed and a great many children are not in the settlement's school. The streets are narrow and the yards fenced and swept clean, but piles of garbage lie rotting on the outskirts of the settlement and dirty water festers in ditches.

Brits had no special introduction. She simply

drove in, parked under a tree and began talking to the first person she saw. That was Ria Maseko and her little dog Sibi, who have since become friends.

Brits walks through the settlement greeting people, looking for dogs – and cats – that need attention. People are friendly, for the most part, but it's because they know her.

The difference she has made is visible: healthy, cheerful dogs trot out to greet her when she arrives. Children congregate, bringing dogs to be dewormed, or to lead her to their shacks, where there are dogs belonging to the family.

It disturbs her to find dogs on chains, but it is common because owners can't risk their animals killing chickens. Brits supplies lightweight chains and kennels and encourages owners to give the dogs water bowls. Where dogs are being kept in conditions that are illegal, she writes a letter to the owner and assists in solving the problem.

The other side of the 4Paws operation is the trapping and sterilisation of feral cats and taming and rehoming kittens, as well as educating the public about the feral problem and how best to approach it.

Brits runs 4Paws on donations, and is desperately trying to raise funds to continue her work, as her primary donor has decided to support only large organisations.

"There are still so many places that receive no animal welfare," she says. "In each of these places, animals are suffering unnecessarily. We are keen to employ and train more staff to do field work and need more vehicles to reach more places.

"We get many litters of homeless puppies and we would like to encourage people to consider giving a homeless dog a home instead of buying a dog from a breeder or a pet shop."

She hopes, eventually, that 4Paws will have its own clinic with a vet.

☛ Anyone willing to assist 4Paws with financial support, sponsor an underprivileged dog or cat for sterilisation, or receive the 4Paws newsletter can contact Merinda Brits on 083-377-3219 or [merinda@4ourpaws.org.za](mailto:merinda@4ourpaws.org.za)