

In solidarity, from Kliptown... a story of freedom in this moment of lockdown

A collaborative writing by the 1955 crew

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What follows is a very human story of a resident driven Covid-19 initiative amidst the thirteen shack communities of Kliptown, Soweto. It tells of strategies plotted through a collaboration that, like the virus itself, doesn't heed time zones or political boundaries, but that is deeply rooted in the dusty streets of this long neglected south Johannesburg suburb. This is a modern-day tale of a few extraordinary people who fellow residents have dubbed the "health superheroes".



It all begins with four long-time friends who met years ago doing academic research around the character of space in Kliptown with its ghostly cultural footprints, its harsh realities and its need for upgrading. Three of us live in Kliptown, one does not. When together, we hang out talk, share meals, listen to music, look at art. We read and discuss Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness Movement as a liberating school of thought. We wrestle with maintaining sovereignty given our differences in knowledge sets, incomes, races and amidst a history and contemporary of white ideologies and their hierarchies.

Last year we registered a non-profit company, the social enterprise 1955 LLC. And yes, 1955 is a direct reference to the Freedom Charter, and we're located in Freedom Charter Square squatter camp. We are not a charity or an NGO. We started the company to chase our dream of a Kliptown community radio station, The Voice of Freedom, but with a business acumen that keeps our social mission at the centre and our critical need to earn income in a supporting role. We're entrepreneurs from the streets of Kliptown and the halls of academia. We were on that road, developing our plan to transform local plastic waste to usable products, when weeks ago, in early March the reports of Covid-19 crossed the globe and arrived, confirmed in South Africa.

We began thinking about what this would mean to the tight streets and passages, the crowded homes, the inadequate shared toilets and taps of Kliptown's neighbourhood. We know these

streets, the realities of poverty here, the prevalent underlying health issues, the inadequate social services. This virus scared us, it galvanized us into action. We read about virus loads, rates of human-to-human contact, human-to-surface contact, infection rates, carrier spreading, vector spreading, virus shedding through aerosol droplets, droplet size to settling, data from previous epidemics and early Covid-19. Our hearts sank as we contextualized all of this within Kliptown, its high levels of ambient particles in the air from dusty streets, the burning fuel that already irritates residents' lungs, the chronic hunger, the lack of medical support. We watched the numbers around the world continue to rise.

We listened to the local health guidelines of social distancing and self-isolation. Of keeping socially connected through FaceTime gatherings, of remaining employed and in school through meetings online. But these don't reflect or address Kliptown's everyday reality. In all of the Covid-19 health messaging, increased hand washing is the only possibility here. But it's a walk to the nearest communal tap, and there is the uncertainty of whether the water stays on and additional tanks continue to be provided. A wariness reflecting years of failed track record around basic service provision.

While much of the city feels a sense of quarantined protection, here, going to the toilet means exposure. Freedom Charter Square alone has about 300 chemical toilets, each shared by seven households. We know this number because Thabang, one of our 1955 crew, recently rose early to meet the truck that drives through Kliptown three times a week evacuating the buckets of sewer sludge. He also met the residents contracted to clean them. He found that no additional PPEs (Personal Protective Equipment, the acronym we are all becoming so familiar with) have been provided during the Covid-19 crisis to any of these workers or to the drivers. Nothing is being done to prevent the carrier spreading of the virus by these trucks as they move from community to community across the city.



If you've never been inside one of these chemical toilets, they're poorly ventilated and as they sit out in the sun become stuffy, hot, smelly. In the still air you cough or sneeze and aerosol droplets settle on surfaces, you breath and the droplets settle on surfaces. So many people coming and going. The surfaces - doors, handles, seats - are touched and retouched then touched again. In the lingo of Covid-19, this means high rates of human-to-surface contact. How many of us carry and shed the virus? We now know that coronavirus can remain infectious on plastic surfaces for 70 hours¹. We know that we are most likely to shed virus before we have any symptoms. And we're learning that repeated small exposures to this virus can build up our virus load and eventually make us sick.

We reached out to another old friend, Carlyn, a retired doctor who had worked for years with the CDC in southern Africa at the height of the AIDS epidemic. We devised the following simple strategies that could help keep down the infectious dose: support hand washing,

¹ Science Media Centre (26 March 2020) Expert reaction to questions about COVID-19 and viral load. Retrieved from: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/expert-reaction-to-questions-about-covid-19-and-viral-load/>.

regularly disinfect the toilets with the time tried and affordable dilute bleach solution (WHO, CDC), and supply soap and toilet tissue to the community's most vulnerable.



We started local and small, we had no funding and at that time no permit to move around. Limited by the full lockdown, we sourced soap and toilet tissue in Kliptown's shops. Word got out about what we're doing and shopkeepers helped. We were brought to the front of lines, we were given small discounts. Then we started sharing the supplies among the *gogos*. Quickly the number rose to over 180 (now close to 300). Then something beautiful happened, when we returned many of those grannies had set up hand washing stations. They were sharing their precious supply of soap at outside taps or beside buckets with a ladle. They were telling people to wash their hands.



Their actions energized us. But we still needed to tackle the toilets. How do we apply the bleach solution and yet keep our crew healthy as they work? First we thought handheld spray bottles, we brainstormed ways to make them available at each toilet. The best case that they be used with every visit, we wrestled with how to keep them safe from contamination given multiple users. Then we discovered that the trigger for those bottles is made in China, the few available in Joburg were an outrageous price. Next we considered high pressure spray compressors borrowed from the local street car washers. It seemed promising, but in reality had too many limitations to be practical. Finally we settled on commercial grade compressor sprayers.

We found fourteen. Two 12L models from Masterspray in Midrand, who helped us out with the price. And twelve 6L units from Hawk High Pressure Pumps. But Hawk's Joburg number forwarded us to a lockdown cell number. Turns out those other twelve sprayers were at Monitor Distributors in Cangella, KwaZulu Natal. He heard our story. He said he'd get them to us. He did, with no delivery charge.

We sourced bulk bleach and liquid hand soap from Joburg's Blendwell Chemicals, but delivery was repeatedly delayed. Determined, we turned to another friend, an Uber driver with a delivery permit. He could give us a bit of a deal on his price, if one of us went along and if our pickups were fit in amongst other deliveries. We were finding our groove in the art of lockdown hustle.

Finally, our supplies and equipment were all in Kliptown. But still we had no permit to operate and we needed PPEs. We designed a plastic face shield from a 2L plastic bottle and cap (free to download at 1955.co.za with care and use guide). We bought bottles from local recyclers who have no income during the lockdown. Nhlanhla at Kliptown's Sasi Upholstery and Design ran with the idea. He now makes our face shields, cloth face masks and plastic aprons. We double checked our formula and the best practices for handling bleach, we found and washed a 200L plastic tub, and we started mixing.



Today, we have our permit, our days are long. We rise in the cold morning air to mix the bleach solution. We want to beat the clean-out truck, to spray down the hoses before they're used in our toilets. The truck is early or late or breaks down, it leaves a trail of slopped chemicals and waste. We keep going. We disperse the 13 sprayers, carrying them to points across Kliptown. Repeatedly people ask, "Are you from the government?". "No", we reply. Other residents join us, we always make sure they leave with something to eat and a bit of money. Some of the community leaders assist us. This is our solidarity, our *ubuntu*. it comes from within the community and is addressing known, everyday, urgent needs.



Carlyn pointed out from the start that there would be no definitive, empirical knowing of how we are impacting the spread of the virus, but we are having an impact. People see us in the community, they're talking, children tell each other not to use the toilet til we've sprayed, to wash their hands. We've created a database and regularly check in on those most vulnerable. Our resources are still largely our own, and they are thin. We're careful so that we can sustain our commitment to the grannies, but the project cannot grow without more funds.



We don't know how this story will end. We know our strategy won't stop the transmission of Covid-19, but the measures should help to slow it down. Sometimes in the middle of the night we still wake up scared. But we're not waiting for the virus or the government or a hand out. We're not the "other" in the informal settlements. We're not victims of racism or poverty. But we are hanging onto President Ramaphosa's words of a vision for the post Covid-19 future:

'Our new economy must be founded on fairness, empowerment, justice and equality. It must use every resource, every capability and every innovation we have in the service of the people of this country'. But for now, we are those words.



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<https://trellis.org/1955-kliptown-combats-covid19>