

making a difference

A Winston-Salem native and his wife
are changing the lives
of children in South Africa

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When he was a student at Reynolds High School in the 1950s, Norton Tennille told one of his teachers that someday he hoped to be “either a lawyer, a teacher or a preacher.”

Now Tennille, 65, has, in some way, been them all.

Today, he and his wife, Jane Keen, direct the South African Environment and Education Project in Cape Town. They were recently interviewed by *Mature Times* while they were in Winston-Salem visiting friends and Tennille’s mother, Margaret Tennille, a former state legislator who lives at Arbor Acres retirement community.

Later they responded to more questions about their project by e-mail.

For 25 years, Tennille practiced environmental law in Washington. But in his early 50s, he had become “disenchanted and needed a dramatic change” in his life, he said. He described his work in Washington as “satisfying and rewarding,” but wanted to devote the rest of his working years to something more far-reaching.

A visit to South Africa in 1994 provided the turning point he needed. It was just before the country’s first democratic elections and the end of apartheid. “I fell in love with the country

and was intrigued by the challenges it faced,” Tennille said.

Captivated by the country’s beauty, he decided to use his expertise to help preserve its unusual environment. Tennille started the Southern Africa Environment Project and moved to Cape Town. While taking his environmental message to black township high schools, students began to ask him and his volunteers for help in other subjects.

Tennille began to wish that the black students there could have opportunities more like the ones he had at Reynolds High School. As time went on, the project became more varied and included subjects requested by the students such as English and math — and even debating, poetry and journalism. Volunteers came to help, including Eva Dubuisson, the granddaughter of Dr. Ted and Charlotte Blount of Winston-Salem, and many others.

Soon Tennille was joined in the project by Jane Keen, a well-known Cape Town social worker who had lived there all her life. Just as he had fallen in love with Africa, Tennille said, he fell in love with Jane. “She was quite simply the loveliest and best woman I had ever met.”

Two years ago, they were married, and Keen began to work with SAEP. He is the executive director of the project, she is the director. “It sometimes makes for debate who is boss,”



Keen and Tennille direct the South African Environment and Education Project in Cape Town.



LEFT: Preschoolers attend class in one of SAEP’s education centers in the Philippi Township. RIGHT: Richard Tyembile is one of SAEP’s many interns.



Aloe grows in Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town.



Photos courtesy of Norton Tennille

Norton Tennille and his wife, Jane Keen, can see Table Mountain from their backyard.

Keen said. But Tennille said there is no question. “Jane is boss,” he joked. “But since we are both volunteers, she can’t fire me.”

Keen told about the progress in the area since the end of apartheid. “Changes in education and employment have been slow, and not all changes have been improvements. There is more unemployment now than before.”

Tennille said that few jobs are being created in such areas as manufacturing and agriculture and that high-school graduates are not prepared for further study that would qualify them for better jobs such as those in science, engineering or communications.

“Most young people will end up selling fruit and vegetables, setting up car washes, hawking on street corners, or working as laborers or domestic workers.”

In black schools, the typical class has more than 50 students. “Teachers are overworked and underpaid and don’t have time for individual attention. The work we do is to supplement what the schools can offer, including after-school activities that develop skills and self-confidence.

“There are no gymnasiums, no playing fields, no art rooms, no music rooms. Access to

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