

Asanda Jonga of Grace Vision

 By [Ilse van den Berg](#)

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The rolling hills of the Eastern Cape make you delve into your deepest thoughts, even if you don't like your thoughts travelling so deep.



Rolling hills of the Eastern Cape.

Animals are the Xhosa people's pride, so they roam the streets (and national roads, for that matter) freely. The potholes are dangerously deep, and when you see a stop/go sign at a section of road works, keep in mind that it is only a suggestion and that there is probably no-one officially manning the road.



Animals in the road in front of Zithulele Hospital.

An uncomfortable five-hour journey from East London took us into the sticks of the Eastern Cape, one of South Africa's most neglected provinces. We finally arrived at Zithulele Hospital where I met Asanda Jonga, Grace Vision's much-loved ophthalmic assistant. Her unfeigned smile was all I needed to convince me that the journey was worthwhile.



Asanda Jonga, ophthalmic assistant at Grace Vision

The truth about vision impairments in South Africa

Approximately [400,000 South Africans are blind, most as a result of cataracts](#). Nearly [80% of cases of blindness are preventable or treatable](#) with medical interventions but those suffering usually cannot afford such medical procedures. Though cataracts are a normal part of aging, if they aren't diagnosed and removed, it can quickly result in a person going blind. A mother or grandmother going blind usually means one of the children needs to leave school to help around the

house, to clean, cook, and fetch firewood and water. This results in many children not getting a proper education.

There is also a rising number of children with treatable vision impairments who don't have access to the treatment they need. In fact, ten years ago, not one child was wearing spectacles in schools, and children with visual impairments were obviously further disadvantaged.

With permission from the Department of Education, Grace Vision began a screening programme in rural schools in the OR Tambo area in the Eastern Cape. The mandate from the Eastern Cape Department of Health was to service deeply rural areas, so the NGO started visiting the clinics as well as schools.



Kids get in line for eye screenings.



(L) Jonga assists an elderly patient. (R) Young boy gets an eye test.

Free eye screenings and primary eye care

Jonga is in charge of admin at the rural clinics they visit on a regular basis. Grace Vision's fully equipped rural eye-care trucks enable them to visit some of the most hard-to-reach clinics and schools to perform free screenings in order to identify patients who need spectacles or eye surgeries. She is an integral role player on the ground when it comes to registering people and doing admin, but also on surgery days as she puts patients at ease by making them feel safe and cared for and as she encourages and educates them about eye care.

"I was looking for something different, a challenge, because I was bored with my job," recalls Jonga. And from purely observing, it does look like she found that challenge she was after. But with her level of energy and positivity, never-ceasing smile, and evident love for the people of the Eastern Cape, she somehow manages to make this job look like a walk in the park.

With more than 42,018 adults and 65,702 children screened; 14,280 spectacles distributed; and nearly 2000 cataracts removed, Grace Vision is restoring sight and dignity to some of the poorest of the poor in South Africa.



94-year-old has vision again after 3 years.



Woman post eye surgery with companion.



#UnsungHeroes: Migail and Morgan de Klerk of Rural Reach

Ilse van den Berg 1 Apr 2020



We can't do everything but we can do something

As we drove back to East London after a week off the grid, my eyes wandered over the hundreds of pink and turquoise mud huts scattered across the hills and valleys. "We can't do everything, but we can do something," they say. And there is so much to be done in the world. There is so much suffering all around us, and it is probably one of the greatest sins to think our small efforts won't make a difference.

Here I saw the raw evidence of how a young, compassionate woman is living a life dedicated to giving back sight and dignity to those who were helpless and dependent on others before. I saw how her contribution in the greater scheme of things is allowing teenagers to get back into school so that they can get the education they deserve and eventually qualify for good jobs that can sustain their own families.

"I believe giving even just one person a second chance in life makes a difference," says Jonga. "Just being part of this amazing programme and seeing so many lives changed after having their sight restored shows me that I am contributing something to the world," she concludes.

For more on Grace Vision, go to www.gracevision.org.za.

ABOUT ILSE VAN DEN BERG

Ilse is a freelance journalist and editor with a passion for people & their stories (check out Passing Stories). She is also the editor of Go & Travel, a platform connecting all the stakeholders in the travel & tourism industry. You can check out her work here and here. Contact Ilse through her website here.

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