

Cameron Brisbane has channelled his emotions from being teased as a child into championing the rights of the downtrodden. His focus is housing. TRISH BEAVER reports

From outcast to

ACTIVIST



PHOTO: TRISH BEAVER
Cameron Brisbane shows the difference between a RDP house (left) and a community-designed home.

CAMERON Brisbane has never quite lost his British accent, even though he has lived in Africa for more decades than in his birth country. It was because of this same accent that he embarked on a career for social change.

Brisbane, executive director of BESG (Built Environment Support Group), said when his parents settled in South Africa in the late sixties from the United Kingdom he was targeted by local kids as an outsider. "At the age of nine, they mocked me and closed ranks on me. I found myself on the outside." It didn't help that Brisbane was a good pupil.

He found himself trying to find ways to escape being victimised. "I was quite nerdy because I found that books could entertain me. I remember when I was staying in a block of flats in Durban. I was playing with domestic workers' kids. I invited them to come upstairs to play. But the domestic workers would shout at me and tell me I was causing trouble."

Brisbane said he did not really understand what apartheid meant but he knew that some rules were for blacks and not for whites. "I think from an early age I sympathised with the whole anti-apartheid movement because I always felt as if I was an outsider. Yes, I was white, but I was treated as if I was a traitor."

Brisbane's official introduction to anti-apartheid structures happened when a Welsh schoolmate, who was also ostracised for his accent, told him about a local meeting to be held in Pietermaritzburg for the National Youth Action. A 15-year-old Brisbane arrived at a dingy flat and recalls that for the first time, at the political meeting, he felt welcome.

There he was to meet some of the leaders who would shape his thinking in the years to come. In the last three years of his school life, he became noticed by the special branch of the police who were certain that he was up to something.

At times he was detained for questioning and at other times he was followed. "One time a man offered me a lift home," he recalls. "He insisted and it was raining, then he kept asking me why I had been hanging out at the Indian place. I just gave evasive answers."

"He wanted to know where I lived so I gave him a false address and the place where he stopped had a big 'Beware of the Dog' sign. He watched as I got out the car and entered the yard. I prayed that I would not be eaten by a huge dog."

All this time his parents had no idea what he was doing. He told them he was busy with band practice. His mother was followed when she was driving his car and stopped for questioning. His parents were conservative and did not like his political views. Brisbane said political life was fraught with tension as you never knew whom you could trust.

"We knew the government had spies everywhere. You had to be so careful!" After getting his sociology degree he decided to go back to the UK and see what he could do from abroad. Most people would go to Swaziland or Lesotho to avoid going into the army and from there into exile, but Brisbane had a legal right to be in the UK.

He remembers the frustration of applying for jobs and getting nowhere. As a newcomer in the land of his birth he was once again treated like a stranger. People didn't like his South African accent. He was told he was too qualified. He was eventually referred to the Professional Job Centre for graduates. After months he sneaked the details off a job card and managed to get a job as a supervisor in the Glasgow gangland trying to create vegetable gardens for the elderly.

"I think I realised there in Europe that poverty was not just an African problem and that there were many factors that contributed to this disease," he said. "In London I also helped

to new houses while we fixed up their homes. You have to develop empathy and listening skills for people who feel powerless."

Brisbane went on to develop a niche for designing homes for special-needs communities. The old council houses system was made redundant and local councils were offering tenders to contractors who could build housing for the community provided they met certain requirements.

For many years he also worked for the anti-apartheid movement as a photographer, taking pictures of important people as they met in London.

Brisbane returned to South Africa in 1994 and has been involved in pro-advocacy work since his return. "I see myself as a change agent. I am still on the side of those who have no voice and I am always willing to offer skills and knowledge to those who are willing to learn."

He believes that supplying housing to the poor can be managed differently. One way would be to offer an alternative to RDP houses. He is outspoken about corruption involving housing tenders and he believes that more should be done to encourage poor communities to participate in building their own homes and become empowered through the process.

Working as executive director for BESG, Brisbane is involved in trying to engage the local government in ways to improve service delivery.

BESG has programmes aimed at local councillors to get them to understand the Constitution and their roles in the municipal process. "South Africa is a new democracy and we all have a long way to go," he says.

• To comment or to offer information, contact trishbeaver@witness.co.za

Letters Editor, P.O. Box 362, Pietermaritzburg, 3200

Looking wator

SLIPPERY

BE