

Firstly, we would like to express our condolences on the loss of your friend a year ago. Also, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the Stichting Vrienden van La Rouche for the donation which was deposited into the account of Stichting Starfish on 24 January 2010.

I remember clearly back to February of last year, when Ank (my sister-in-law) told me about Jan Crins, whose cooking lessons she and Paul (my brother-in-law) had been attending. She told me that he was terminally ill, and that the last phase of his cancer was deteriorating rapidly. I never met Jan, but I remember his story so clearly, because of the impression Jan's acceptance of his illness made on me. Ank told me that instead of responding to his illness with 'Why me?' he had said, "This kind of thing happens to others, why NOT to me?" I found this such an admirable way of looking at one's own impending death, and I wondered (and doubted) at the time whether I would be able to have that selfless view if I was in Jan's situation.

So when Paul phoned us on 30th of January to tell us about the Stichting Vrienden van La Rouche, and all that Jan had arranged with friends regarding his personal wishes at this time of death, and regarding the division of his estate (and the donation to Stichting Starfish), both my husband and I were extremely moved by what Jan had initiated. We are, on behalf of Stichting Starfish, unspeakably grateful to Stichting Vrienden van La Rouche, for selecting Starfish for a donation.

I, myself, was born and raised in South Africa, as a white person during the time and aftermath of Apartheid. I grew up with the constant realisation that even though I didn't come from a wealthy white family, I was born with Opportunity. In South Africa, a land so divided into rich and poor, 1st and 3rd world, having opportunity seems more a privilege than a given. Even though Democracy is officially the state of South Africa (since 1994), there are still so many families living in squalor in squatter camps, and that, just a few minutes walk from relatively wealthy areas. One is constantly confronted with poverty. For example, on the days when rubbish is collected, and the garbage is put out on the streets, poor people are to be found everywhere sorting through the rubbish for something to eat, or anything else they might need. And the only difference between those people and me, is that I was born into a family where I could choose to make something of my life. It has always seemed so unfair to me.

This thought has always been with me, and I have long wanted to be able to do something about it.

In spite of the trend to transparency in many charitable Foundations nowadays, I still have never felt comfortable giving money without knowing for sure that its actually making a difference. And that is how Starfish was born.....

I wanted to know that any and all money donated by myself (or others) is used solely for the purpose and the goal of the Stichting. Being South African myself, I also know that one can't just give money e.g. to a poor family in a squatter camp and trust that it will be spent on what will really change the course of their lives. I also realise that we can't save the whole world, and that I am only one person who also has a life, responsibilities, a small child and a job, and that I would not be wise to be over-ambitious. I decided that if, though my efforts, ONE family who really needed help, could be helped, then that would be at least some small change in the world.

To this end, I selected the three small children of my mother's household help. Abby was 43 years old when her twin girls were born, left by her husband to raise them alone without financial help. Shortly after they were born Abby was landed with her grandchild (a son of her eldest son) to raise as her own. (This is common amongst the poorer black people of South Africa). Abby is practically illiterate and lives in a squatter camp just outside the town where my mother lives. My mother first met her when Abby's job was to sweep the passages of the shopping centre where the legal firm my mother works for is housed. Abby was fired when her employer found out she was pregnant. My mother offered her a job cleaning at her house two days a week. She then enquired amongst friends and helped Abby get cleaning jobs for another 4 days a week. So, the family situation is that Abby, now almost 50 years old, works 6 days a week, for a very small salary, and has three small children to raise. She lives in a squatter camp in a little shack made from pieces of wood and plastic.

I would love to be able to buy her a house of brick (even though it would still be in the squatter camp, at least she would have a toilet and an electric light and stove, instead of having no sanitation or lighting). However, I decided that the first priority of Starfish must be to provide the three children with the Opportunity of choosing a future for themselves. This, in my opinion, is to be obtained by receiving an adequate education to secure them a decent income in their future.

If Stichting Starfish should have money enough to ensure the childrens' education, then I would look into buying a brick house in the township for them.

The Stichting has now been active for 3,5 years, and this year is the first in which we have seen visible effects in the children. The twin girls have just started at 'basisschool' and the young boy is still at crèche for this year. The children speak English now (which they would never have done if Starfish hadn't been able to ensure that they attend crèche in an English-speaking environment). However, this year it has also become evident how expensive a good education is in South Africa. We are paying around €100 per child per month (excluding school uniforms and extra's) just for their schooling. In South Africa, the government does not pay for education as it does in The Netherlands.

So far the Stichting has been exceptionally lucky. We were selected by Basisschool De Mortel and Sint Lambertus in Swalmen (in 2008) as their good cause for their annual 'vastenactie'. We received an amount above €5 000, 00 which was an incredible injection into our account.

We currently have just above €8 000 in the bank account of Starfish. No one receives a salary or financial remuneration for what they do for Starfish and overheads are kept to a minimum (e.g. paying KvK annually). I think here mainly of my mother, who organises paying all that is needed for the children in South Africa. My husband and I make the decisions about which schools to try send the children to, what we are willing to let Starfish pay for or not, but my mother is the one who does all the work in South Africa. If she (or someone else) wasn't there to co-ordinate the financial side of things and make the payments, I would have my doubts as to where the money was going to. The way things are arranged within the Stichting at least meets my requirements and goals regarding making a difference in someone's life. I also think the fact that the money donated by our +- 20 donors monthly is used solely for the children is also one of the reasons that they donate to Starfish, and that's the way it will stay. Suffice to say, we are an extremely small Stichting, but with a very clear and definite target group and purpose.

I meant to write a short thank you note to the Stichting Vrienden van La Rouche, but have ended up giving you background on the Stichting Starfish. I will send, under cover of another e-mail, our newsletter sent to donors at the end of 2009. Therein is a synopsis of the past few years, and many photo's.

I would like to ask if we may add a short article to our website about the donation from Jan Crins' estate, and whether we may add his name or the name of the Stichting Vrienden van La Rouche to our list of donors on the site?

Remains to say, that even after his death, Jan Crins has made an even greater impression on me, and firstly I wish I could have met him since he sounds like a man worth knowing, and secondly both his remarks I mentioned earlier and his generosity will be something I will not forget. I am sure his remarks will resurface when I am one day (as will happen to us all) faced with the mortality of my own life. I hope then that I will be as big as him in my views of life and death.

Yours faithfully

Lee Sutherland (on behalf of Stichting Starfish)
Oprichter and Voorzitter van Stichting Starfish