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May 25, 2006

## **RERC Partner Participates in pioneering program in South Africa**

### **A pioneering project to facilitate communication and empowerment of adults with severe communication difficulties**

Diane Nelson Bryen started ACES (Augmentative Communication and Empowerment Supports) 18 years ago at the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University, and now it has travelled to South Africa. ACES is a unique program which, through AAC technologies, supports the development of a literal, social, and political voice among adults with significant communication disabilities. It is the only program of its kind in the United States and, until recently, throughout the world.



Six South African adults (from 5 provinces in South Africa) with severe communication difficulties, along with their personal assistants, have begun to participate in a training program focused on leadership, independent living, and preparation to enter the labour market. They will form part of the two-year long FOFA program (which means "to Fly" in Northern Sotho).

Based on Bryen's ACES at Temple University in the US, the FOFA Project is the first of its kind in Africa. It started in September 2005 with the intention of making it a long-term project, with extension to other provinces. After the training week, held at the University of Pretoria, this year's participants were supported by community-based support persons in their respective areas. "We focus on integrating adults with and without disabilities into the community by encouraging them to develop strategies for facilitating better interaction and understanding between peers" says Prof Alant.

Dr. Diane Bryen has continued to support the adoption and implementation of ACES in South Africa by travelling to South Africa to consult and participate in FOFA training from May 22-26, 2006. The FOFA training was conducted at the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (CAAC) at the University of Pretoria and focused on communication and empowerment of youth with severe communication difficulties.

*The persons with severe disabilities who are participating in this program are:*

Daniel, 21 years old from rural KwaZulu-Natal. After his schooling career he is sitting at home in his village sometimes helping with typing and making birthday cards for friends and family. He loves to socialize, but few of the people in his community can understand what he tries to communicate. His dream is to become an advocate for disability, sharing his insights and making a difference in his own community. He started this training program in 2005 and will be finishing his training in 2006.

Frans, 19 years old from KwaZulu-Natal, is in his final year of schooling at the Open Air school, Durban. He is severely disabled and uses a head pointer to access a keyboard to communicate as well as to write for academic purposes. He also attended the training last year and will be completing his training during 2006.

Lebogang, 24 years old from Kuruman, finished grade 12 and now wants to enrol at TUT for Business Economics in 2007. He was born with an athetoid cerebral palsy which renders him severely physically disabled. His dream is to open his own restaurant back at home in Kuruman. This program is focused on assisting him to prepare for his further studies.

Martin, 30 years old from Pretoria, finished his *Accelerated Diploma in Education with*

*specialization in Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities in the Classroom* at the University of Pretoria cum laude in 2006. He is confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak. He is currently employed at the CAAC and the CSIR as a disability consultant. He is continuing his education in computer programming and is already involved in leadership activities in the field of disability. His dream is to live independently.

Pat, 41 years old from Bushbuck Ridge, Mpumalanga. He was previously employed by the Military, but had a brainstem stroke which rendered him wheelchair bound and unable to speak. Presently he is unemployed because he needs to develop a more sophisticated communication system to enable him to get back into the employment sector. This is his first year of participation in the program.

Levuyo, 20 years old from Cape Town. He was born with athetoid cerebral palsy. He finished school but has major communication problems. He is back at school to improve his literacy levels and will be participating in the FOFA program for the first time this year.

"With this project, we are able to assist people with cognitive ability, but no access to communication, to participate in a meaningful way in society," says Dr Kitty Uys, Project leader. "Not only do we focus on intensive training, but we provide participants with an appropriate PC-based communication system to enable them to reach out to others."

See the photo below of FOFA staff, participants, and personal assistants. Diane Nelson Bryen appears in the center of the back row.



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