

# **OWL HOUSE FOUNDATION**

## **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: AGM 25 NOVEMBER 2023**

### **Introduction:**

What is it about Nieu Bethesda that immediately piques the interest, as one drives onto the gravel roads from the tar, with the town unfolding shortly thereafter. It evokes that romantic feeling of time having stood still; a safer place with the fresh smell of bread being baked; and where people still doff their hat to say good morning. For many of us coming from the mad hustle and bustle of the city, this is an alluring notion.

And then of course there is the Owl House. The mystery and unusual story of the Owl House has infiltrated many of our world's, leading at some point to an exploratory trip to Nieu Bethesda. Mine was about 30 years ago. I immediately fell in love and have been coming back to Nieu Bethesda and the Karoo whenever the opportunity arises.

**Nieu Bethesda and the Owl House are not for everyone, but I presume it is for all of us sitting in this room.**

So what is the mystery of the Owl House? It is so 'otherworldly' compared to most of our realities, which on the surface, fit a suburban model and a regular pattern of life. This is before one even finds out about 'Outsider' artists. Helen Martins fits the definition completely.

Helen's singular vision and idiosyncratic obsession resulted in the creation of a private world that fascinates and enchants to this day. Her art, seemingly untethered from the reality of her immediate environment, has resulted in a lasting legacy for Nieu Bethesda, the Karoo and South Africa. One can safely say that Helen Martins is one of, if not the most important Outsider artist to have lived in South Africa.

The Owl House is a defining feature of Nieu Bethesda, attracting artists and tourists to this beautiful town and region. It has helped to shape the character and success of the town.

In addition, the value of the Owl House stretches beyond its borders and has been recognised internationally and was declared a National Heritage Site in 2017, one of two heritage sites in the Eastern Cape.

### **Review of 2023**

Delivering a *more than* comprehensive report of the ilk of Fulvio de Stefanis' in 2022, is a daunting task. So I won't. I will use Fulvio's report as a reference. The

issues essentially remain the same. See Fulvio's report on the Owl House website - it is illuminating reading:

<https://theowlhouse.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CHAIRMANS-REPORT-Sat-12-November-2022-.pdf>

Before continuing with my report, I need to commend Fulvio again for the significant effort he and fellow board directors have undertaken during the last 4 years, to establish 4 of the key pillars on which the Owl House Foundation (OHF) stands today.

These are:

- a Heritage agreement with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) - June 2019
- an Owl House Foundation Memorandum of Incorporation compliant in terms of the 2008 Companies Act of South Africa - November 2019; revised to comply with the Companies Act in December 2022
- a 10 year Lease Agreement between the Dr Beyers Naude Local Municipality (the asset owner) and the OHF - September 2020
- an integrated Conservation Management plan agreed with SAHRA - November 2021

Fulvio has dealt with these pillars **comprehensively** in his 2022 Chairman's report.

### **1.1 Owl House Team - Internal and External advisers:**

The necessary professionalisation of the OHF has continued. In this regard I would like to thank:

- Our Owl House team on the ground:

under the leadership of the OHF Manager Venique Barendse. Thank you Vernique, Bernie, Angela, Michelle and Michaela for your dedication. Without you we don't have an Owl House, a living organism which gives life to the Owl House and all who visit

- Charles Graham

for being a voice of reason and picking up the balls on the ground, importantly doing the accounting without which we will not know whether we are financially sound or not

- Jurie Smit from The Labour Co in Graaff-Reinet for:

- maintaining the OHF POPI Policies and Procedures, and being the registered information officer for the POPI Act
  - maintaining the OHF Occupational Health & Safety File
  - Implementing all employment contracts to be compliant with current labour legislation. In this regard for holding a workshop at the Owl House premises during the year to guide employees through the process of understanding their contracts and getting all contracts signed
- Rowan van Gend as Town Planner to the OHF:
    - **for Rowan's commitment beyond the call of duty to progress with the rezoning of the Crafter's Precinct.** Rowan's commitment, sage advice and energy in standing by the OHF has been exemplary. See further discussion on the Crafter's precinct below
- Derek Light as legal council:
    - for always being there for the OHF and his invaluable legal council and steady hand on the tiller
- Van Wyk Theron for their:
    - accounting services and for doing the yearly audit
    - acting as Company Secretary for Board meetings
    - Acting as Public Officer, in particular relating to the application for the S18A tax exemption for donations made
    - in particular to Joanne Pringle, our Company secretary, for being there with all the challenges we have had this year
- Joze Maleta:
    - for IT support and cloud services including email storage, as well as guiding the installation of the Inverter for the OHF, which has been a game changer in 2023

## **1.2 Owl House restoration work:**

The principal object of the OHF is the protection, preservation, conservation, maintenance and promotion of the Museum known as The Owl House. This is enshrined in the Memorandum of Incorporation (MOI) of the OHF.

Restoration is thus a key aspect of the OHF reason for being. Helen's creations, which include sculptures and intricate artworks, are not only subject to the elements,

enduring harsh winters and scorching summers over many decades, but also face a more challenging and changing local environment.

So, how fortunate are we to have Amanda Syman to lead our restoration efforts at the Owl House. Amanda is one of the OHF angels. **Thank you Amanda.** Your commitment, passion and love for the Owl House is inspiring. More Please!

### **1.3 Owl House Social Media:**

We all know how important social media is today. It is a career on its own. Much as we would like to have a permanent person driving this important function, we have not had the funds to allocate a professional resource at this time. We trust this will change as more substantial fund raising activities take place.

The challenge is that the gravitas and reach of the Owl House requires a skill set to do it justice, in its quest to promote the Owl House to the wider world.

So after much discussion we have been fortunate that two of our Board members, Eugene Hon and Daniel Van der Merwe have volunteered to kick start a social media initiative. You may have seen the Instagram site which has seen the light, initiated by Eugene. The first posts are great. Watch this space. ([owlhousenieubethesda](#))

### **1.4 The Crafters precinct:**

I would like to note again the background to the Crafters Precinct.

Though informal trading started outside the Owl House in 1995, the process of designating a suitable trading area for crafters gathered momentum after the Owl House was declared a National Heritage Site in 2017. Many initiatives and proposals have followed, and though with good intent, have not resulted in any successful solution.

The responsibility for providing traders' stalls within a Crafters Precinct has always vested with the Dr Beyers Naude Local Municipality (DBNLM). This has been acknowledged on many occasions by the DBNLM who in principle have supported the proposals made to date. The most recent acknowledgement of responsibility is the Report of the DBNLM Executive Committee of 7 October 2021 as signed by Dr E M Rankwana to be a true reflection of the meeting.

However, due to the logjam of not resolving a suitable trading space, the Owl House Foundation (OHF) in 2019 agreed, in conjunction with the DBNLM, to facilitate the process of drafting and submitting a renewed application, as well as facilitating the

construction of such a precinct. This is aligned with the secondary objective, point 3.2, of the OHF MOI.

This was duly done and the rezoning for utilising the road reserve was granted by the DBNLM in November 2022. An appeal against this decision was made on 28 November 2022.

Despite SPLUMA by-laws requiring that a hearing take place within required dates, and the DBNLM notice that such a hearing would take place on 23 January 2023, this has not happened. As a result, and after numerous follow up requests resulting in no action, the OHF has submitted two letters of demand to the DBNLM that the appeal hearing take place within a subscribed date.

In addition the OH Professional Town and Regional Planner has submitted a complaint to the MEC of the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) to intervene and get the Municipality to convene the outstanding appeal hearing.

The OHF believes it is doing all in its power to address the issue. The Crafters Precinct remains a DBNLM responsibility. As such, it is suggested that relevant Nieu Bethesda Associations, residents and related parties should as well direct initiatives to the DBNLM to step up to the plate and hold the outstanding hearing of appeal, so that the matter can be progressed.

The OHF will not take on the DBNLM responsibility of establishing a Crafters Precinct, and will not agree to Crafters being housed, temporarily or otherwise, on OHF property. The OHF does not have the capacity to do this.

In this regard, it must be noted that the consistent message which has been communicated by crafters over the years, is that they are not prepared to move away from their current site. It does not take much to imagine what would happen if the current crafters are moved from their site in front of the Owl House: they would most almost certainly be replaced by an influx of new crafters and lose their strategic position.

**We remain aligned to facilitate as best we can a humane and dignified solution to the long outstanding Crafters Precinct.**

### **1.5 Challenges - a sober moment:**

The challenge for a Nonprofit Organisation (NPO) to keep its head above water must not be underestimated. The OHF has felt the pressure this year:

- the aftereffects of COVID are still with us
- less visitor numbers mostly due to economic pressures

- diversions onto alternative gravel road due to tarring of main road resulted in visitors avoiding the drive to NB
- floods in December 2022 with road washaways which reduced tourism traffic
- static revenue but increased costs with professionalising the Owl House

As a result visitor numbers dropped by 7% to 11,255.

Due to the continued success and contribution of the shop, income remained more or less the same with a 2% drop to R1.1 million from the previous year.

Expenses increased by 26% however, mainly due to:

- increased maintenance to buildings; the camel yard and glass restoration
- an inverter being installed during the year, essential for continued smooth running of Owl House operations
- additional financial consultant hours with new accounting packages
- Staff - increases and pension fund contributions

As a result the Owl House made a loss of R143,000 for the year.

The Board recognises the need to increase revenue and is a topic that will remain top of mind in the year ahead. In this regard:

- entrance fees have been increased
- the pictorial Owl House book has been completed as a significant fundraising initiative. The next step is finding a suitable donor for this vision

Funding challenges will be ongoing. A significant amount of work went into applying for a National Heritage Council (NHC) grant in 2022, but without success. Subsequently we have had positive engagement with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) on sourcing new avenues of obtaining donations. One we will be pursuing is Small Grants for African Heritage Projects, from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation based in the USA.

## **1.6 The Owl House Board:**

**And just when my fellow Board Directors thought they were going to be left out, here we are:**

**The biggest thank you to:**

- **Nils Flaatten (Vice Chair)**
- **Samantha Graham-Maré**
- **Bruce Rubidge (Treasurer)**
- **Eugene Hön**
- **Daniel van der Merwe**

**How does one even start to thank you for your time commitment and passion for the often daunting commitment which is required to keep the OHF on an**

**even keel and embracing the challenges of our time. I am acutely aware of what it means to be a volunteer for endeavours like these.**

### **Conclusion:**

It is a privilege to be part of the team seeking to preserve Helen's legacy for the benefit of Nieu Bethesda and the Karoo. The task for us is to continue to protect and position the Owl House as the national treasure it is; the extraordinary vision of Helen Martins. ***But not on our own...***

There is so much that can be done to support the Owl House Foundation, and there is only so much the steady band of volunteers on our Board and otherwise can achieve at any one point in time.

So we'd like to ask you, the audience, if you see an opportunity where you can make a difference, please contact us. There have to be so many skills in Nieu Bethesda and inhabitants who would like to make a difference, and would love to.

One more thing before I sign off...

### **'For the Love of Light' - the definitive Pictorial story of the Owl House:**

This time I am leaving the best for last.

You may remember last year Fulvio announced that the Board had committed seed capital for the production of the ultimate pictorial story of the Owl House.

I would like to ask our board member Daniel van der Merwe to give us an update and share the results of the year's toil.

**Personally I would very much like to thank Elzilda Becker, Merwelene Van Der Merwe and Team for telling Helen's story with such passion; sharing their unique interpretation of the light, free spirit and magic of Helen's world.**

Andre Pierre Marais  
Owl House Foundation - Chairman  
25 November 2023