

# A miracle between Heaven and Earth

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Everyone in the Camphill community (both school and farm) agrees that it was a miracle – or perhaps a succession of miracles. Fanned by gale-force winds, in clouds of dense red smoke, the flames came leaping and rolling and roaring down the mountainside to the narrow Hemel-en-Aarde Valley below. The scattering of white-washed buildings of this little settlement lay right in the path of the runaway fire. It seemed as if nothing could save it from being completely wiped out.

Yet, two weeks later, against all odds, Camphill has risen like a phoenix from the ashes, shaken itself off and, thanks to the intervention of an army of guardian angels, has picked up the reins and continues to provide a haven for intellectually-disabled adults and children.



*The gutted teachers' room with intact table and 'good-to-go' printing paper.*  
PHOTO: Suzette Olivier

It all began when, at about 13:30 on that Friday, the WhatsApp message came through from Danie van Zyl, Hemel en Aarde Rural Safety Association coordinator: the fire was on its way over the mountains from Karwyderskraal, travelling fast, and would probably be in the Valley in 20 to 30 minutes' time. 'Evacuate NOW' concluded his message. Then, as in a disaster movie, everything started to happen very quickly, though seemingly, in slow motion.

Fortunately, on Fridays the school closes early and the buses had already left to take the 60 day-learners home. When they had dropped all the children, they were told to hurry back to pick up the school's eight boarders and 17 foreign volunteers, together with the remainder of the 54 farm residents and volunteers (some had already left) and take them to Sandbaai Hall where an emergency disaster centre had been set up. In the nick of time, the first bus with driver Shane, arrived and was able to accommodate everyone. As the last of the people and vehicles left, the flames reached the outer perimeter of the farm, licking at the feet of the first houses.



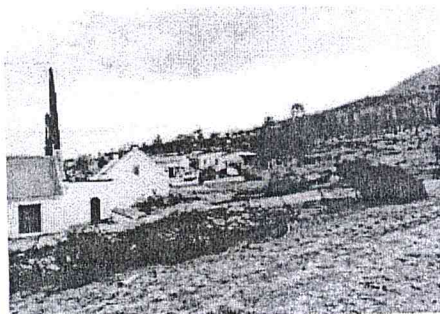
*The burnt-out barn at Camphill farm from which all the cows were safely rescued. PHOTOS: Supplied*

On to the scene came two of the heroes of the day, farm maintenance manager, Giel Pretorius and his assistant Ndakuthini Fihla. They managed to connect the four fire hoses to the hydrants on the property and dragged them up to the blazing inferno. At that stage, the fire seemed to be heading in an easterly direction towards the school and they threw everything they had at it with the aim of keeping it away from the buildings.

By this time, with fire raging on both sides of it, the road to Camphill had been closed, not only preventing the second school bus from reaching the property, but also fire-fighting crews and engines. The Valley, acting as a wind tunnel, was filled with dense smoke, preventing the helicopters from flying in, so it was left entirely to these two brave men to do what they could to save the property. They continued to fight the fire until 11 o'clock that night. Although they had worn masks, Giel had to be rushed to hospital suffering from smoke inhalation, which later turned into a serious lung infection.

Sometime before he left, however, the fire turned back on itself and headed in a westerly direction towards the barn holding the farm's milk cows, and where 180 free-range hens were running free in the hen garden. Nearby were also the 27 bee hives which farmer, Duncan Clews had built himself, as well as the dairy and the herb and vegetable gardens.

The terrified cows were herded to a green pasture which had recently been irrigated and the cackling and struggling hens were caught and put into the hen house. By that time the farm tractor was in danger of being consumed and the flames had shot up the many tall gum trees on the property, scattering burning branches in all directions.



*The Camphill School buildings surrounded by scorched earth and charred vegetation.*

While mayhem was raging out of control back at the ranch, the survivors in Sandbaai Hall were being overwhelmed with gifts not only of food and water in abundance, but mattresses, bed linen, toothbrushes, soap, toys for the children and much more. In fact, both farm residents and children were having quite a good time, all things considered. They saw it as a bit of a camping adventure and when it eventually came time to leave, one or two of them were fairly reluctant to do so.

Now, two weeks later, the full extent of the miracle has become evident. While both the school and the farm look as if they are stranded in a moonscape and smoke is still spiralling upwards here and there, no children or adults living or working at Camphill lost their lives or were seriously injured. Every cow survived, only five of the 180 hens succumbed, and the only building of any significance to be lost was the large barn. The one tragedy was the conflagration of all 27 bee hives and their industrious inhabitants.

Although several outbuildings were completely destroyed, most of the other buildings were left relatively untouched. However, certain bizarre anomalies occurred that can only be described as miraculous: The wooden fence surrounding the kindergarten playground was destroyed, together with a small tree on the outside, but nothing on the inside was scathed, including wooden jungle gyms and a small wooden wendy house for the children to play in.

The teachers' staff room next to the school was completely gutted, but in the middle of the room the wooden table was untouched, together with a couple of boxes of printing paper. A fiery branch

burnt a hole in the roof and ceiling of a classroom and a fragment fell on a book below, burning it up. Nothing else was affected. Two cats belonging to one of the staff members which could not be found at the time of evacuation, were sitting on the verandah when they returned. All the carports attached to teachers' houses at the school were demolished, except for one which sheltered the owners' lovebirds in cages.

Now the farm residents are back in their own rooms and although some of the small workshops were burnt down, there are many other activities to occupy their time. They are amazed to see the grass beginning to show through the burnt earth and the beautiful pink flame lilies appear. At the school, it is still too smoky for the children to return yet.

In the meantime, donated feed is pouring in for the cattle and the hens, the pipes are being repaired and CSV Construction is working day and night to clear away the debris. A heart-warming indication of the support Camphill received was the arrival, shortly after the fire, of three young men from Zwelihle. Trevor Nkoyi and his friends, John and Andrew had come to help clean up. They were there for a full week, working alongside farm assistant, Sinovuyo Dyani who, together with farmer Duncan, Debi Diamond and other staff members had also played heroic roles during the conflagration.

And so, like the beautiful flame lily, Camphill is celebrating the life springing from the rubble. The loving kindness of the people of Hermanus and the pride they feel for these institutions has touched them deeply and proven to be the greatest miracle of all.