

focus

Capturing street children on film

THREE Cape Town photographers have captured the lives and many moods of street children as well as documenting background information on where they come from and how they survive daily in the city and surrounding suburbs.

During eight months of research Jenny Altschuler and Pam Warne, who both run photographic courses at the Community Arts Project in Woodstock, along with one of their students, Costa Christie, spent their weekends and hours after work making contact with these children and later, when they'd built up a trust, taping conversations and taking photographs.

These photographs on exhibition at The Link at St George's Cathedral show these vagrants at play — whizzing down the hand-rails of escalators, breakdancing, shooting orange peel with elastic bands and jumping over fences around car parks.

They've also shown them sound asleep in storm drains, vans or derelict houses or sniffing thinners from "pineys" (a plastic milk bottle) to escape the harsh realities of their lives.

Making contact with the children was difficult, and it took time to establish a rapport.

In the beginning Pam and Jenny visited the Homestead in New Church Street while Costa went to the Activity Centre in Commercial Street hoping that the children there would help them.

Interviews

But before they took photographs the trio felt it important to explore the situation for themselves and examined some of the factors that forced children to take to the streets.

This included interviewing a cross-section of people who affect the children's lives — teachers, social workers, police and parents.

Working with a group of seven to 14 children, which varied daily, they carried out this pilot study with care so as not to expose illegal activities

in which the children might be involved — such as theft, dagga smoking or prostitution.

The children, ranging in age from seven to 16, live incredibly mobile lives — sometimes hibernating for a while, other times on the move, and the streets provide them with a security they cannot find at home.

They have rejected family systems for many reasons, such as overcrowding or a single parent with a stream of boyfriends.



Sometimes they fight, but mostly they share.

And one little boy had his arm broken twice when he returned home as his parents could not understand the way he was living.

The photographers' documentary work is filled with poignant and amusing quotes from the children, like: "I just walking, I got nothing to do." And: "A stroller is someone who thinks he is free."

Behind this bravado they're hiding a lot of pain and fear, the reason perhaps, says one social worker, why they sniff thinners.

"But thinners also make them aggressive," said Pam. "They might fight with each other momentarily over money but mostly they share food and clothing."

Most of them have been at school at some stage and now survive by working as newspaper vendors, scrounging food out of bins, or visiting steakhouses where owners feed them. And sometimes they live on the other side of the law...

ANNE BARON



Sleeping side by side for warmth.