

# CAROLINE CELEBRATING COMMUNITY, CREATIVITY AND HER CREATOR

by Vida de Voss • photograph Susan Nel



Few people are raised with as little family and community as Caroline de Meersseman. It is perhaps for this very reason that her heart is as big as it is and she shows patience and love where others would have called it stop long ago. Aloneness has had its disadvantages, but also its advantages.



**T**he nuns were probably the most inquisitive of all. The tall man walked the little girl to school every day. And faithfully he came to collect her at the end of each the day. It was clear she was well taken care of, but there was definitely a woman's touch missing. A woman would have done something with those fat curls forever in a short boy's haircut. For all their voiced and unvoiced questions, Caroline had her own questions.

"Dad, have I been baptised?" "No." "Can I be baptised?" "The choice is yours." "Yes, I want to be baptised and become Catholic." "If you are 100% sure that's what you want, I'll support you." This was pretty much how Caroline was raised: left to find her way in the world and make her own decisions. Caroline would ask the nuns all her questions about becoming Catholic – doing her catechism, becoming baptised and becoming a reader. Intrigued by these women in their strange outfits and the mysticism she experienced in the church, Caroline reached for community in this simple act of joining the Catholic faith.

Being Dutch-German, Peter had no family in Namibia and few friends. Divorced when Caroline was nearly 3-years old, Peter raised his daughter without community. There were neither aunts and uncles nor cousins present to do what family does – visit, eat together, play together, call each other "my this" and "my

that". But Caroline had Peter.

As a young child, Caroline had to entertain herself for hours on her own. Never one who waited to be entertained by others, she would always find a little project to keep herself busy with – from painting rocks to cutting out pictures in magazines and pasting them into a new design. Taking initiative thus wove itself into her identity during these solitary times. But Caroline wasn't always alone. Her father loved dogs, which meant there were always one or two fluffy friends to play with at any time. Much of her childhood was, however, filled with scissors in the one hand and a sharp eye directing the hand smearing the Pritt.

While she still loved her paints, the uninhibited mannerisms of the dogs, and her father's tickles, Caroline was growing up. In a brief conversation at the washing line, Caroline reached for a femaleness brimming inside of her. "Dad, I want to grow my hair." She sensed a desire to explore her identity beyond the little short bush, which, in her view, was not even a style. "Ok. As long as you know what to do with it." Thus began the navigation of her womanhood through little exploits and conversations with girl friends. There was certainly no conversation with her father about the changes she was experiencing in her body. This was the 1990s with no internet. Where your friends could not explain things to you, you quietly searched for relevant books in the library. When her menses began Caroline was thankfully on holiday with her mother.

As a teenager, Caroline was still very much on her own. By the time she hit high school, church and God drifted into the background with new challenges that came onto the scene. Peter's rule was "You make your decisions. You find yourself. And I will support you."

A man with a vivid imagination himself, he protected Caroline in his own unique way. He wouldn't have her drive beyond Windhoek with her little car – and the day she did, the car broke down irreparably – though three months later. When she wanted to go to Croatia for a friend's wedding, he yelled at her, "Don't you know people get kidnapped there?" and he stomped off in a huff. By this time Caroline was mature enough to understand his outburst came from a place of fear of losing her.

At the end of high school in the late 1990s, Caroline wanted to study photography when you still needed to buy a

roll of film, develop the film and then only print the photos. This time Peter said "No!" and insisted there was no money to be made. Out of rebellion Caroline took a gap year. A year later in response to her father's frustration with her directionlessness, Caroline enrolled for a course in travel and tourism. She loved her uniform and the job that came with it. But after two years as travel agent at Trip Travel, Caroline missed her art.

By this time Caroline figured out if she can't do photography, then graphic design is probably an even better choice. Would it not be as simple as cutting and pasting as she used to do growing up – but this time using a computer? Subconsciously another motivating factor may have been the recognition that the solace it brought her could become a gift to others as well as a means to various communities.

For the next two years Caroline was a student at City Varsity Multi-Media School. After completing her studies and a short stint working in Cape Town, she returned home to join DV8 Saachi & Saachi at the age of twenty-five. At DV8 she honed her skills by working hard and learning a great deal. When the company began with significant restructuring Caroline did the unthinkable – she went solo. It, however, took a year of waking up in the middle of the night, pondering the wisdom of such a move. In the end she made the audacious decision to work for herself.

During this time of coming into her own, Caroline was fortunate to be part of an artistic click with Fenny, Sara, Clara, Abed, Oshosheni and Itayi. Together they gave birth to Spoken Word that has since given numerous Namibian poets and musicians the opportunity to display their talents and grow from passion to fame.

Brimming with energy, Caroline also had her own first art exhibition: photography and graphics. At last her two loves had both found their rightful place in her life; by now she had become a lifestyle and family photographer. Her exhibition titled, "Who framed God?" was an indication of her heart to honour God.

The little girl with the cropped hairdo, had gone from independently deciding to become Catholic at the tender age of ten to a young woman brave enough to love and serve others through her job and every-day life. ♀