How Brad Pitt came to stay in Clarens
WORKING IN FAME’S SHADOW
By Karen Fraser

For all his celebrity status and publicity that he can command at any time, Brad Pitt did not set foot on South African soil to generate a media frenzy. While tabloids belted hell for leather around the countryside in search of the elusive star in a compromising situation, little did they realise that the soft-spoken man was on a personal quest for answers.

Much has been written about U2’s front man, Bono, who has risen the profile of Africa’s plight. He is the first to admit that celebrity is a fickle currency but one that he himself uses to great effect. But, in a time when so many look to the perceived wealth of America to solve Third World woes, the American’s are now understandably wary about giving handouts and are probably confused as to the dualism where on the one hand there is so much resentment towards them yet on the other, help is constantly being demanded. The Irish band, U2, raised public awareness to the ongoing war in their land and conflict is no stranger to them. Until 9/11, Americans thought themselves untouchable and, sheltered behind this belief, were thus hit that much harder when the attack came. Despite America’s subsequent “hands-off” approach, Bono has continued to fight for the cause, desperate not to lose crucial time while Americans lick their wounds before re-emerging into the role of World Benefactor.

Bono is quoted as saying, “The World is on fire and we’re holding a watering can!” Please forgive me for giving a very rough third-hand translation of this quote, but you get the gist of it! Passionate people are infectious about their cause and it is rumoured that Bono’s crusade made an impression on Brad Pitt. When a star pledges his support behind a cause, it has to be very carefully thought through. It is, after all, a business decision for the most part. Usually a celebrity pledges support to a cause that has personal meaning, e.g. Michael J. Fox and the Foundation for Parkinson’s Research, Christopher Reeve and his Paralysis Foundation, etc. For many though, a “passion” project is what’s called for and this is best exemplified by Bono and the tireless Aids awareness campaign he actively pursues.

We live with poverty all around us and the Aids crisis is practically headline news every other day. We have become detached from it all. Does it really take the Brad Pitt’s of this world to shake us back into reality? Is the onus upon celebrities to make use of their influence upon society to wake people up to the fact that we simply are not doing enough? So, while the little town of Clarens was abuzz with the idea that a “Hollywood Hero” was in town, the reality was that the man was on a fact-finding mission regarding support for Aids orphans.

Over the last few weeks I have been privileged to meet a number of people who do not sit idly by but are in the field literally making things happen, using any means at their disposal to create a working solution and while their actions make them stars in our eyes, fame and pats on the back are not what they seek. I’m proud to hold up Clarens’ own Sister Hilda Boonstra as one such example. The truth of it is that Brad Pitt was invited to South Africa by an organisation...
called DATA (debt AIDS trade africa), an advocacy group headed up by Bono with offices in Washington and London. Erin Chapman is the Policy Director and she, in turn, introduced Brad Pitt to ASAP (African Solutions to African Problems) headed up by Priscilla Higham.

Cilla, as she prefers to be known, immediately knew that taking the star along well-worn paths through Soweto and Kayelitsha would not have nearly as much impact as showing him inspirational projects on the ground in rural Qwa Qwa, where women are growing vegetable gardens and feeding their own orphans, ailing and elderly. Cilla took Brad Pitt to visit Pulane Cuelar, who heads up a successful community based organisation called Kakaretso, a development centre where more than 900 children under six are being cared for. In this particular instance, ASAP donated tools, fencing and seedlings, as well as a South African invention, Hippo Rollers (portable water tanks), to get the project up and running. “The perception is that donations just go into this great, big, black hole and that attempts are for the most part, futile,” says Cilla. “But that’s not true. It actually takes very little to have a huge impact.” ASAP places a good deal of emphasis on supporting orphan carers, i.e. youth who have finished school and not found gainful employment, so are in a position to look after the children. Cilla says, “If you support the community, the community will look after the children.”

It is not about throwing large sums of Dollars at the problem in the hope that it will go away. Targeted donations, carefully guided purchases and on-going support to the people on the ground to help them understand what practical steps need to be taken to make the project sustainable is a far more effective means of aid. “School to School” is an innovative ASAP project where children in New York schools are raising money by washing cars and selling doughnuts to sponsor orphans in Africa. Such an endeavour highlights the reality for the American child who is making a tangible difference in the life of another child half a world away, since the funds have a direct impact on the ground and go straight to the children in need.

While the temptation is to write the stars’ humanitarian attempts off as mere publicity stunts, I find myself appealing to the incurable romantic side of human nature to cut them a little slack. Who the hell are we to judge anyone’s efforts anyway and if the motive is genuine, how would we know? I wish I had the power of public persuasion on my side and the will to do half as much as these folk have managed in just one trip. Already appointed as an ambassador for Nelson Mandela’s 46664 Aids Campaign, God Willing, Brad Pitt does put his considerable support behind the Aids cause. South Africa could do with the likes of him on our side!

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