

Belgians take gap year

Lise Beyers

INSTEAD of languishing on the sun kissed beaches of tropical islands for a gap year, Carolien Vaneynde (27) and Jacob Eeckhout (26) have instead chosen to assist the less fortunate souls of New Rest, a poverty-stricken area of Wellington.

These two young Belgians arrived in South Africa last year in November and headed straight for Khanya Community Centre.

Both have traded their 'yuppie' existences and flourishing careers for this corner of Drakenstein.

Back in Europe, Carolien studied and worked in hotel management and Jacob was stuck behind a computer at his software marketing company.

The couple visited South Africa three years ago and fell in love with the country.

On their return to Antwerpen in Belgium, they discovered that their young lives had already fallen into a rut of work, eat and sleep.

"We realised that there is more to living than just earning a lot of money.

"On our first visit to South Africa, our tour guide coincidentally took us to a community project in Plettenberg Bay which was also run by a Belgian.

"Her work stuck in our minds, and when we decided to take the big step, we contacted him and he put us into contact with Marietjie Bezuidenhout of NorSa.

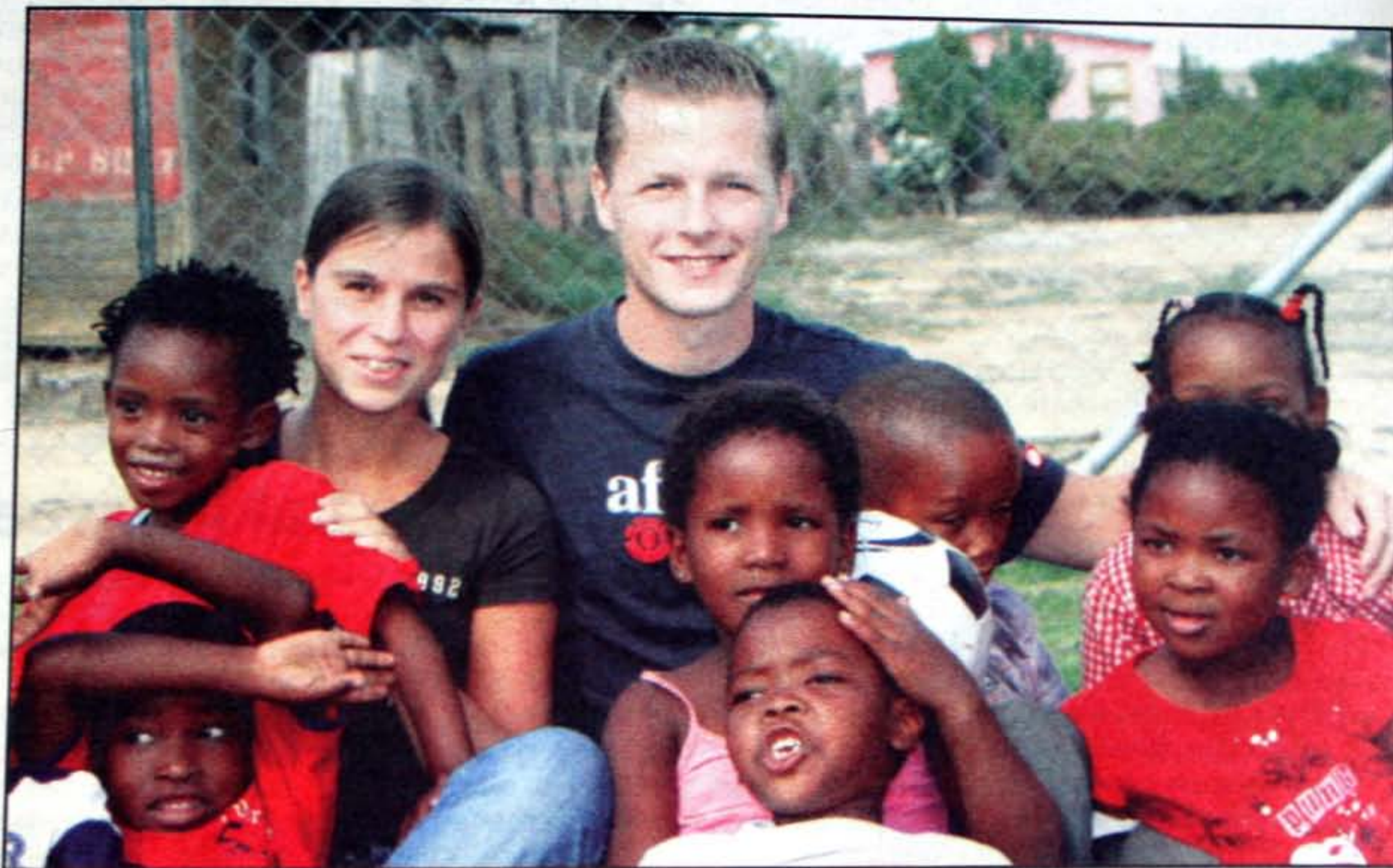
"We told her of our intentions to spend a year doing volunteer work in South Africa, and she welcomed this proposal."

Soon the youngsters sold most of their worldly possessions and headed south.

Four months later, the two have become familiar faces in New Rest.

"The community has truly welcomed us with open arms, and wherever we drive or walk, we receive warm smiles and now we often hear our names being called.

Apart from assisting in the day to day



HEARTS. Two young Belgians, Carolien Vaneynde and Jacob Eeckhout, have lost their hearts at Khanya Community Centre in New Rest.

Pic: Lise Beyers

chores at this community centre, Carolien and Jacob have taken the initiative and are offering computer lessons to children and adults from the ages of 14 to 25.

The courses entail the basic workings of a computer, as well as knowledge of programmes such as Microsoft Excel. The students are also regularly tested on the work which they have been taught.

"Some of the children have never even seen a computer before. They have just heard about the magic of computer literacy. And it is heart-warming to see how quickly they learn. They are really very good."

Jacob has also established a social football team in the community for the youngsters.

And the two have been involved in building houses for the centre's foster families.

Both are not regretting their bold move at all.

"We feel so fortunate that we can be part of this community.

"On our first visit to South Africa, we mostly saw the glamorous side of the country. But now we have become a part of the reality of South Africa. The people are very special and there are so many different cultures.

"It is an honour for us to be able to reach out to the community and in return meet such wonderful people who are so grateful for so little."

Jacob and Carolien are still unsure where their lives will lead them after their year at Khanya is complete.

"Perhaps," they say, "we can stay a little longer."