

Dispute at Harvest Youth Project

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A former employee of the Harvest Youth Project, which creates opportunities and training within the visual and performing arts sectors to inspire and empower Hout Bay youth, has accused the initiative's chairperson of mismanagement and "working out" people involved in the project.

However, Helena Fagan has vehemently denied the claims by Jeff Jonkers, whom she dismissed from the Harvest Youth Project at the Harvest Centre complex in the harbour. He was fired on August 1.

Ms Fagan says Mr Jonkers had become a highly disruptive influence who also failed to perform essential duties needed to apply for funding.

She also revealed that funding for the centre had completely dried up, resulting in its temporary closure. It is scheduled to be reopened on October 8, thanks to engagements with the local community.

Mr Jonkers, who coached hip hop and rap classes, is adamant Ms Fagan had turned the project into a "disaster zone".

"She was always coming grumpy to work, and moaning that there wasn't any money. This had an impact on the staff. We never knew if we were going to be paid."

Mr Jonkers, who has taken to Hout Bay Facebook groups to vent his anger, said the relationship with Ms Fagan broke down when he began to question how the trust administering the project was run.

He had started to research the project after he became aware Ms Fagan needed to make a pitch to the Department of Public Works for a new lease on the Harvest Centre building, he said.

"We didn't even know who the trustees were, and she wouldn't disclose to us how the financing was done. She also started to play the coaches against each other," he claimed.

"The worst of it was that there wasn't any food for the kids. Except when visitors came. Then she would stuff food in the fridge, to make it look like everything was fine. She also demanded that every coach have a 100 kids under their care but the building is not even safe for 30 kids. She also didn't do anything to grow the staff."

Mr Jonkers said he was dismissed because he was viewed as a "threat".

"I was actually fired (earlier this month) in an inhumane way. She did it out on the street, and gave me a verbal warning, two written warnings and my dismissal, all at the same time."

Mr Jonkers accused Ms Fagan of "taking advantage" of Hangberg's impoverished youth. "One day we did a show at the Waterfront. The kids were eating KFC, and then she started pulling them to have a photo taken so she could brag to her friends about what she was doing in the community. During presentations, she also only speaks about herself, not the project."

"I have been devalued and demonised. She just threw me away. It is very painful that I am no longer working with the kids. The kids I taught, I took them



■ Jeff Jonkers was dismissed from the Harvest Youth Project.

all over Cape Town. I've had hip hop winners, I've had success with them. I'm no longer working there, but I want people to open their eyes to what's happening at the youth centre."

Ms Fagan gives a very different version of what led to Mr Jonkers's dismissal.

Pointing out that the privately-funded Harvest Youth Project was run from private property and therefore no lease agreement was required with the Department of Public Works, Ms Fagan said the financials were available to all the coaches on request.

"I offered to explain everything to Jeff, and on one occasion even waited four hours for him to attend a meeting I had set up, but he never arrived. The fact is he wouldn't come to meetings and he was disruptive. I told him on numerous occasions that if he didn't do his paperwork, he wouldn't be paid. I can't apply for funding unless I have that paperwork," she said.

"Our teachers and parents were complaining about him. Some of our parents even took their kids out of the project. I tried to deal with it in a compassionate way, and I even tried to set up mediation for us to sort this out. But he continues to make threats against me, to the point that I've had to block my phone."

Ms Fagan denied that she sought photo opportunities to promote her achievements. "I do all this from my heart because it's important for the kids."

She said the riots and looting in the harbour precinct in the past two years had dealt the Harvest Centre a crippling blow.

"The Harvest Centre was running at a loss and had to make loans to keep the youth project going. Staff had been warned over the last few months that in its current form the project

was not sustainable, that all available sources of funds, including my personal contributions, had run out, and without better compliance regarding time sheets and class registers, it was impossible to apply for funding and that we needed new creative ways to make it sustainable," she said.

There had been hope on the horizon, however. The Harvest Youth Project would be completely restructured with new contracts on offer to all staff. There would be new challenges but with better financial prospects, Ms Fagan said, adding that she had spent her last personal resources to kick-start the new plan.

A consultant from empowerment non-profit RLabs had been brought in to guide the rolling out of a new brand for a new youth café. Staff would be granted a month of free training.

"(But) at our first exciting big meeting (mid-August) Jeff took the opportunity to arrive late and turn the whole meeting upside down into a chaotic shout down tirade against me for doing one-on-one interviews with my staff – and not liking my daily healthy soup. He must have heard that most staff were complaining about his behaviour and took it out on me in a most inappropriate, unprofessional, aggressive, disloyal and distasteful way – basically paving the way for a total breakdown in what was otherwise an exciting journey of revitalising the project."

Ms Fagan said she still hoped the best for Mr Jonkers in his future endeavours, but she had to focus on reigniting the Harvest Youth Project. "We've been putting a committee from the community in place, and many have volunteered to serve on an advisory committee. I am working overtime to try to find the funding. We are expecting to reopen on October 8."