



we're impressed



Giving Wings

With the support of Oprah's former Angel Network, a rural school in Limpopo is winning awards and uplifting a community. By *Glynis Horning*

WITH ITS STONE tower and roof gardens, the new Vele Secondary School seems to rise naturally from the rugged Soutpansberg, and its pupils and community are rising as naturally with it. "Our matric pass rate has climbed from 38 percent in 2009, to 84 percent last year," says beaming principal Samuel Makhado. Local adults are also benefitting from the school's turnaround, helping with the construction and taking part in its range of community projects.

Funded by the department of education with the usual allocation for government schools, Vele was given wings by a R5-million donation from Oprah's former Angel Network. When OAN established the Creating Schools Trust (a group of professionals specialising in education, the environment and community development) it was with an aim of creating model schools, and rolling them out countrywide. Today, Vele is confirmation of



the project's effectiveness. The school won the Afrisam-SAIA award for Sustainable Architecture, and Steve Kinsler and Derek van Heerden, of East Coast Architects, say this wouldn't have been possible without the community's involvement. Before work began, in 2007, pupils were given cameras to document special places in their area and their lives, and this was factored into the design and the choice of building materials.

"It's our school – it was shaped in our hearts and our homes," says Grade 11 pupil Blessing Ndou, 17, with passion and pride in her eyes. And just as important to her as the stone tower that holds the library and a computer centre is an old tree nearby. "I named this tree Mommy. We used to have classes here, because the classrooms were full," she says.

It seems fitting that the company that built Vele, the Pretoria-based Keren Kula, is headed by women. Keren Hofman,

51, the company's MD, delights in "helping young women grow," she says. "We found our safety officer, Rachel Mugade, 27, locally and trained her. We also taught a lot of women basic skills, like bricklaying."

The school's ecological features are as impressive. Solar panels help power the 100 computers, rainwater is harvested, grey water is recycled and the toilets have been designed to work without water. Careful positioning of classrooms keeps them naturally lit and ventilated, so they can stay cool during the intense Limpopo summers, and warm during the frosty winters. The roof gardens promote insulation. "We used to get so hot in summer that kids would sleep in class, and so cold in winter we would sometimes stay at home," says Blessing. "Now we want to be here all the time!"

Improved nutrition helps, too, and everyone is benefitting from Vele's food and herb gardens. "We're sharing our produce with the community and showing them how to grow their own," says Blessing with satisfaction. "This way, we can all fly!" 