



PSYCHOLOGY

OF

FEAR

Claire Myhill tackles the fear associated with crime

The areas of Westhill, Hill 60 and Cradock Heights are considerably safer than many other places in Grahamstown. Residents of these areas do experience house robberies and petty theft occasionally, but according to residents, students and police statistics, it is a safe area to live in.

However, drive around these areas and you will find yourself faced with many high walls, sections of barbed wire and electric fences. Furthermore, what you will not be able to see are the beams protecting many of the houses – residential and student digs alike.

Anna-Marie van Vuuren is a librarian at Diocesan School for Girls and has come to live in Grahamstown after

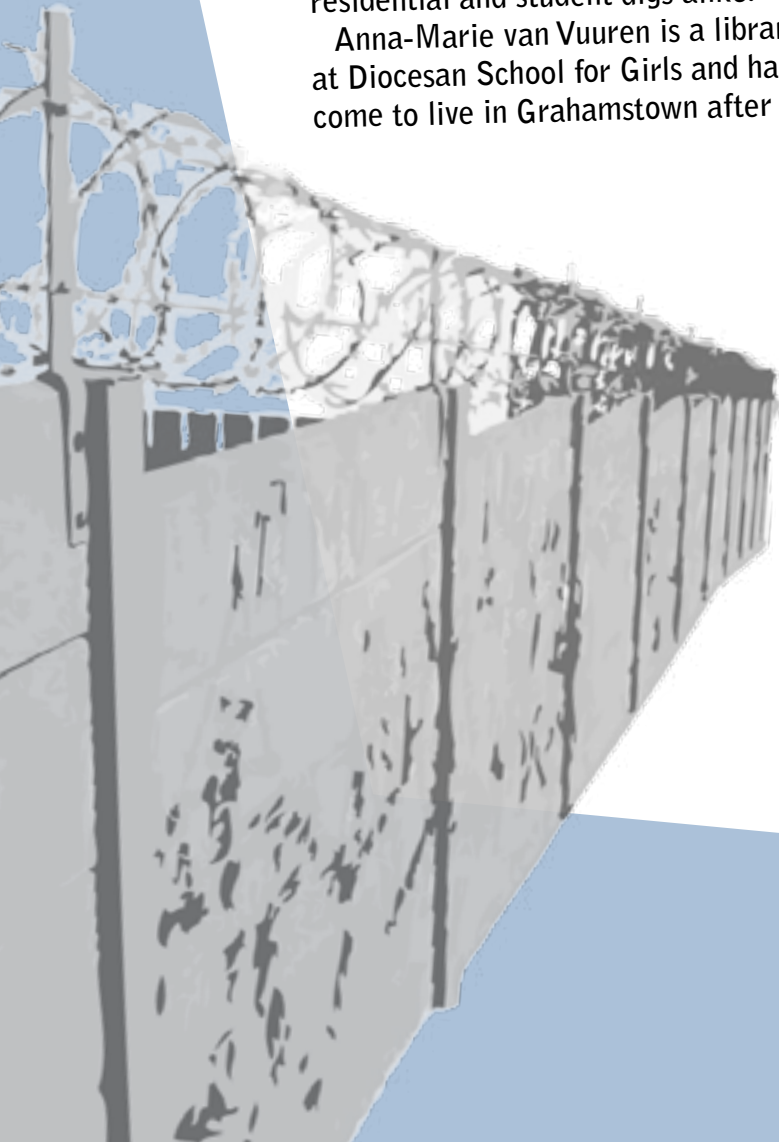
living in Pretoria, Johannesburg and for many years abroad in places like Turkey, Canada and the US, often because of her husband working for The World Bank. She does not feel unsafe living and working in these areas but assures that “in South Africa you are stupid if you don’t look after yourself.”

South Africa is home for Anna-Marie, but after living for years in Johannesburg she feels that there is no comparison between it and Grahamstown, and hardly went out whilst there because of a invasive fear of being hijacked.

She contrasts living in Istanbul with here in Grahamstown as both places have high levels of poverty. There are similar socio-economic problems but she never felt unsafe and that the poverty was a threat there, which she attributes to the Islamic faith; “You will not find people stealing or begging, they would rather sell you sweets than beg for money.”

Whereas here, she feels that much of the poverty is a legacy of our Apartheid past, as is the violence. “In South Africa people can be very brutal” she says in reference to people who will take a life in order to gain a cell phone.

Anna-Marie does feel that as South Africans we can sometimes over-react. “We are so crime conscious we sometimes invite crime in.” She is not alone in experiencing a general feeling of fear, as this has become a major part of South African culture, which is seen in areas like Westhill where many residents would rate crime as almost non-existent but still feel fearful often,





as though it is simply a matter of time before they too become a target.

Werner Bohmke of Rhodes University's Psychology agrees that crime is often linked with poverty and that the victims are also the poor a large amount of the time. He says "what you get is a social paranoia amongst the economically well-off who think that because they're economically well-off they are going to be victims of crime."

He also points to the fact that simultaneously a social distancing strategy takes place, where attempts are made to keep the "undesirable" out and at a distance. According to Bohmke "it has come to characterise Suburban lifestyle in South Africa, the developments of gated suburbs and gated communities."

This leads to Urban decay as people with resources move away from the Central Business Districts to the suburbs and the former become slums, where the crime often sits. As Bohmke says "it's certainly a social psychological phenomenon in terms of group separation and group distinctiveness, particularly along economically based group membership."

Anna-Marie and many others feel that high walls are the answer which

is understandable in a country such as South Africa where crime statistics are often very high. Bohmke discusses those who are economically well-off and how "you want to cut yourself off; you want your privacy and your own space."

However, to what extent do people actually cut themselves off from neighbours and community in these types of societies. There becomes a situation where people cut themselves off from social contact. Anna-Marie feels that community is important in terms of security and that she would like to know those around her.

It seems that there is now a need to consolidate the high walls with the feeling of living in a community, because the pervasive feeling of fear amongst residents of Westhill and South Africa in general will not be resolved as long as crime is a reality, no matter how safe the area one lives in is. Crime does not cease to be an issue; it is merely displaced as Bohmke has pointed out.

