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JILL FARRANT

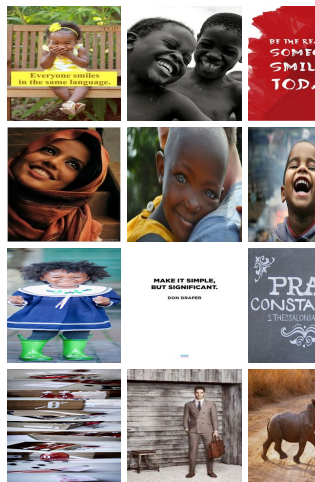
28/10/2015 • 21 Icons South Africa

“There’s something magic going on down by the river,” Jill Farrant told her dad. The child had noticed a green plant that, the previous day, had appeared devoid of life. She was nine.

The experience sparked a curiosity that has led to a career investigating these remarkable plants. The resurrection plants ‘come back to life’ from a seemingly dead state when exposed to the tiniest amount of water. “My discovery wasn’t something I was conscious of at the time but I came back to that memory and found a diary in which I’d written about it,” Farrant says.

What was once just a child’s journal entry – “The ded [sic] plant on the rocks was alive but Dad wouldn’t believe me” – has led to research that has the potential to produce

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Making a difference: Meet



AVBOB's CEO, Mr. Frik Rademan

28/10/2015

drought-tolerant crops, which could help prevent famine and lead to increased food security in Africa.

That diary entry was made over 40 years ago. In the intervening time, Farrant has lived a turbulent life. She has become a celebrated scientist, been the recipient of multiple prestigious awards, battled an addiction to alcohol and – in a freak accident – lost her sense of taste and smell.

With her cropped hair, ceaseless grin and a lone, feathered earring dangling from her left ear, she looks more cool aunt than pioneering scientist. But don't let that fool you. As professor of molecular and cell biology at the University of Cape Town, and one of the top female scientists in the world, Farrant is as tough as she is brilliant.

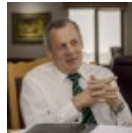
She was the 'laat lammetjie', born when her mother was already in her forties. Her siblings were over ten years older, leaving for boarding school as their little sister came into the world. As a result, Farrant grew up slightly isolated – but with free reign to explore the Limpopo farm she was raised on. It fuelled her love for nature. "It was a time of learning and being allowed to explore nature and ask dad questions. He was an amazing teacher in that regard," she says.

A teacher, Farrant is frank and straightforward when she speaks. The parallel between her personal journey and the evolution of her beloved resurrection plants is not lost on her. "I've had three near death experiences," she says. "And I've been able to, like my plants, dry down and resurrect.

It was after starting university that Farrant began drinking. "The first time I picked up that glass of wine I thought, 'Wow, where have you been all my life?'" she says. Ever the perfectionist, she developed a reward system in which she would allow herself a drinking binge if she achieved high marks.

After six years at university, Farrant hit her low point. She had been named a recipient of the President's Award, given to researchers who, based on potential demonstrated in their doctoral work, are considered likely to become

leaders in their field. "They asked me to give an acceptance speech. I was having my celebration drink in the hotel bedroom. Then I arrived and a glass of champagne was put in my hand and I was like, cool, no problem," she says. "I can't remember a damn thing I said." She woke up the next day and checked into rehab.



Making a difference: Meet AVBOB's CEO, Mr.

Frik Rademan

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Farrant emerged revived. “I stayed clean for ten years, and my way of coping was to throw myself into absolutely everything,” she says. “Everything that I could do, I did. I became a workaholic. I became a long distance runner. I needed other things to escape from the stuff that was going down in my life. I was just swapping addictions.”

Ten years later, a slip in the bathroom led to a brain injury that caused the loss of Farrant’s sense of taste and smell. This triggered a relapse, when she failed to pick up the inclusion of vodka in a glass of orange juice. She entered rehab for the second time and began her recovery.

An essential aspect of Farrant’s ‘resurrection’ is faith. Following her final spell in rehab, Farrant experienced a personal spiritual awakening. It could be a curious paradox – a woman of science who is also a woman of God. “In my personal journey, I’ve struggled,” she says. “I’ve walked, I’ve talked and I’ve had conversations that I know have come from only a higher being because it makes no sense in any other way.”

The passion she has for her work is visible in her eyes when she talks about her plants. There is a sense of awe in Farrant’s voice when she describes their capabilities – as if she still can’t believe what a miracle they are. “I looked at it from the entire systems point of view to understand how these plants can survive 95% water loss. It’s a completely unnatural feat!” she says, sounding as astonished as she must have felt as a nine year old when she first encountered them.

Tucked away in a special greenhouse at UCT, Farrant and her team continue with their research, working to turn her dream of food security for Africa into a reality. She perseveres, not just because she loves what she does, but because she believes in the difference her work can make. Through their research, Farrant and her team hope to develop a strain of drought-tolerant crops. If they are successful in replicating the resurrection plant properties, they will have developed a crop that does not die, regardless of water availability.

South Africa’s current methods of agricultural practise aren’t maintainable and Farrant is hoping to cultivate increased food security for Africa by replicating the death-defying genes within the ‘resurrection plants’. “My dream is for the subsistence farmer, for the poor person who can’t afford to have a huge farm with irrigation,” she says. “All of our agriculture is reliant on a lot of rain, or irrigation facilities. If

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climate change continues at the rate it is, we cannot sustain our current agricultural practices.”

In 2012, her research was recognised on a global level when she was awarded the prestigious L’Oreal UNESCO Award. While she is proud of her research and its potential, Farrant struggled with the recognition. “I’m just me. Really, I’m not anything fantastic. I’ve had a fantastic opportunity. I have the most amazing plants in the world that I work on. I’ve had collaborations that anyone can dream for. And I’ve got a bunch of students who do all the hard work.”

Impressed by her innovation, universities and institutions around the world have tried and failed to lure Farrant onto their faculties. Despite the obvious advantages – superior research facilities, more money – she has no desire to leave. She remains committed to her students and her work. To her, South Africa is home, and the energy of the people is what keeps her here. “There’s something about South Africa that’s just in my blood,” she says. “There’s a heartbeat, a spirit. This is where I want to make the difference.”

The Resurrection Woman and her plants have proved to be a formidable team, both in the laboratory and in life. As many times as Jill Farrant has fallen, she has gotten back up – each time with a renewed faith and passion. It can’t be a coincidence that on the day she was born it began pouring rain, breaking a lingering drought. “That’s my life and that’s the ability of the Resurrection Plant – you add a drop of water to those plants and they resurrect,” she says. “For me you have to add a drop of faith, a drop of Spirit.”

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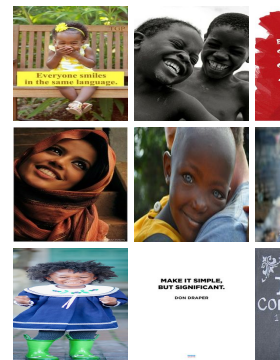
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