

Andrew Miller: Literacy pioneer who fought to spread the word

1964-2015

ANDREW Miller, who has died in Johannesburg at the age of 51, taught adults how to read.

He believed that if the new South Africa, which he had dreamt about long before it became a reality, was to have a fighting chance, it would have to tackle its appallingly high level of illiteracy.

After years as a volunteer teacher at night schools run by a suburban liberal charity called Project Literacy, which was started in the '70s, he joined it full-time in 1993, became its CEO and turned it into a world-class producer of curriculums, teaching materials and teaching methods.

Under his leadership it became the No 1 adult education and basic education and training NGO in South Africa, and one of very few NGOs to survive from the apartheid era.

Like many of them, Project Literacy ("Prolit" to its friends) had awaited the advent of democracy with keen anticipation. Miller believed it would herald a bright new dawn for adult education.

His hopes were dashed.

"If adult education had been a Cinderella under the apartheid regime, it was soon clear that it would take the back seat in a democratic state," he wrote in a fit of profound disillusion after the government's lack of concern and incompetence drove Prolit to the brink of closure in 2010.

After 1994, foreign funding that had gone directly to Prolit was channelled into South Africa's newly legitimate government instead, in the belief that it would funnel this money to NGOs doing essential work.

The closing of the taps came as a shock to Miller and his trustees, who had expected reduced funding as South Africa lost its flavour-of-the-month status in European and Scandinavian countries, but not a complete severance.

Having been run as a foreign-endowed charity, it was suddenly, with no warning, a self-running charity that had to generate its own income to keep going.

Miller professionalised it, turned it into a largely self-sus-



DRIVING FORCE: Former Project Literacy CEO Andrew Miller

taining business and extended its footprint around the country.

It worked with mining groups, Eskom, the prison service and major employers of unskilled workers, and wherever there was a market for upgrading the lowest-paid staff. The great weakness of his strategy was that it left Prolit almost entirely dependent on government contracts.

Miller was a born teacher and

terrific motivator of people. He no longer taught people to read himself, but he taught teachers and the teachers of the teachers. He was hands-on.

He was the inspiration behind Prolit's extraordinary success, but even his burning sense of mission was no match for government red tape, inefficiency, lassitude and general couldn't-care-less attitude. Proposals would sit in gov-

ernment offices for 18 months or longer before being responded to.

There was no understanding that trained staff could not simply be retrenched and then rehired at a moment's notice when the next big contract came along.

He was trying to run a business on the thinnest of margins, but was dependent on people who did not understand the need for cash flow and long-term planning.

They were hugely stressful years for Miller. Week after week he would hear that "the cheque is on the DG's desk", as the deadline for salaries and rent payments came and went.

At board meeting after board meeting he and his trustees were faced with the same inexorable challenge: how to pay this month's salaries? Should they sell assets to pay their staff, and if so, where would they find them when the next contract came along?

Eventually its capital base was eroded down to virtually nothing. When the government withdrew a major contract in 2010, Miller had to retrench more than half of his staff, which he found extremely traumatic because he had trained and mentored many of them himself. He closed many of Prolit's provincial offices and sold its head office building in Pretoria to pay outstanding salaries.

With a skeleton staff, Prolit began to claw back a portion of the work it used to do, a painful process that continued after he resigned in 2012.

Miller was born in Cape Town on May 29 1964 and matriculated at Bergvliet High School. He did two years of army service, completed a BA degree in English and history and a higher education diploma at the University of Cape Town.

He taught Grade 10 to Grade 12 English at Camps Bay High School, produced school plays and the annual magazine, and coached tennis. He managed an academic development programme for disadvantaged black students.

After leaving Prolit he became acting CEO of the Mineworkers Development Agency, and was head of special projects at the agency at the time of his death.

He was a gentle giant of a man with extraordinary interpersonal skills — which did not stop him asking people who submitted long-winded proposals: "Do you think you're f**king Emily Brontë?"

He was a great entertainer and conversationalist whose favourite line was: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

He died unexpectedly in his sleep. He is survived by his sister, Susan. — Chris Barron