

OWL HOUSE FOUNDATION (OHF) ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT:23 NOVEMBER 2024

Introduction:

It feels like only the other week that we were gathered here for our 2023 Owl House Foundation AGM. And yet another year has flown by! Despite the challenges in our beloved country, and for Nieu Bethesda and the Owl House Foundation (OHF), 2024 has been , overall, a positive year for the Helen Martins' Owl House (OH).

Much has been said about the OH in my- and the previous chairman, Fulvio de Stefanis', reports over the last couple of financial years. I would refer you to them on the OHF website as background to the OH and related events in Nieu Bethesda. The challenges remain very much the same.

As a reminder, Helen Martins' OH is one of only two built National heritage sites in the Eastern Cape.

As such, we are all the custodians of a local, as well as, a National treasure and the Board is required to meet all the legislative and regulatory requirements that are required from custodians of heritage sites.

In particular, I would like to focus my Chairman's Report on the positive aspects of this year and the great opportunities which lie in wait for the Owl House. These will not only benefit the OHF, but also have a positive impact for the residents, the other tourist attractions, the guest houses and restaurants in Nieu Bethesda.

We should always bear in mind that the fortunes of the Owl House, as a tourist destination, have a direct economic impact on the village.

Review of 2024 Financial Year

1. Owl House Team - Internal and External advisers:

The biggest *Thank You* to:

- The *in-house* OHF team - ably led by Manager Venique Barendse.

Thank you Venique, Bernie, Angela, Michelle and Michaela for your dedication. Without you we would not be able to open the Owl House doors and share this unique treasure with the outside world

- Charles Graham

Who despite health challenges this year, has ensured continuity in the administration of the OHF, including the financial accounting operations. It does not take much to imagine the importance of this role

- Other contractors and advisors:

- **Jurie Smit** from The Labour Co in Graaff-Reinet
- **Rowan van Gend** as Town Planner to the OHF liaising in particular with the Dr Beyers Naude Local Municipality (DBNLM)
- **Derek Light** as our legal counsel and much measure advisor
- **Van Wyk Theron** for their accounting services/ guidance and public company secretarial consultancy.
 - A special mention to thank **Joanne Pringle**, our Company Secretary, with the ongoing challenges that face an organisation with all the moving parts the OHF has
- **Joze Maleta** for general IT support and cloud services
- **Mike O'Brien** for his pro bono services taking care of the new and changing requirements of the OHF website.

2. Owl House restoration:

The principal goal of the OHF is the protection, preservation, conservation, maintenance and promotion of the Museum known as The Owl House. This is enshrined in the Memorandum of Incorporation (MOI) of the OHF. These objectives have had much focus in 2024.

Various initiatives are under way to address these, in particular, the preservation, conservation and maintenance of the OH.

2.1 Curator appointment:

We announced last year that the OHF had appointed **Amanda Strydom** as the official OHF curator. Great to see Amanda embracing this role and preparing the dedicated Restoration Centre which she heads up for the important work to follow.

2.2 Rupert Historic Homes Foundation grant (RHHF):

Sometimes the stars certainly do align!

On this occasion it was the chance meeting I had with **Chris Maree**, a qualified heritage consultant, at a Joburg Heritage Foundation meeting in Johannesburg. Chris' passion in restoration of the built environment led to the OHF engaging with Chris on compiling and submitting a comprehensive funding request to the RHHF. As the RHHF is focused on providing grants for the built environment, in this instance the application was for money to do work on the OH itself, and not on the artworks of the Camel Yard.

It was a very great day when we were told that the Trustees of the RHHF had granted in full the OHF application for grant funding of R500k. The HUGEST thanks to the RHHF for their visionary work in supporting institutions such as the OHF. I would like to mention again that there is no state support to keep the OH up and running. As such, without support from grant funds such as the RHHF, we will not be able to ensure the essential maintenance and repair that is required for the OH, particularly at this time in its history.

Important to note this is a once-off grant, one we are making full use of.

2.3 Further grant applications - Monuments Council of SA: Camel Yard sculpture review:

The OH encompasses Helen Martins' house as well as the Camel Yard where Miss Helen's sculptures reside.

It must be noted that Helen's creations, which include sculptures and intricate artworks, are not only subject to the elements, enduring harsh winters and scorching summers over many decades, but also face a more challenging and changing local environment. We should also consider that cement technology has undergone huge innovations over the last decade compared to older cement compounds.

Although much has been done to protect these sculptures over the years, including tactical repairs and restorations, it is now time for a comprehensive review of their current status.

In line with this need we have submitted an application to the National Heritage Council (NHC) for sponsorship of this highly specialised task. We await the outcome with great anticipation! This is only the start of what needs to be done next and in this regard the Board believes that we need:

- to embark on a comprehensive 3D mapping exercise
- followed by a restoration plan for each of the sculptures incorporating latest techniques to restore; protect and ensure longevity for the next decade at least

Further sponsorship applications beyond that to the NHC will be required to continue with this work.

2.4 The David Graaff Foundation:

A big thank you for the financial contributions from the David Graaff Foundation and for their consistent support over the years – through thick and thin times. It is generous financial contributions such as theirs which sustains the work of the OHF.

3. Owl House Social Media:

We continue to chip away at this important function and are making progress.

We have a modest:

- Facebook page

- Instagram account
- Website

Funding and resourcing remains an important challenge, especially so with organisations such as the OHF.

A big thank you therefore to highly talented and creative board member **Eugene Hön** who has been running with this aspect of the OHF's presence since our last AGM. Eugene has big plans for the coming year.

So do watch this space!

4. 'For the Love of Light' - the definitive Pictorial story of the Owl House:

Last year you may remember, that it was mentioned that the previous Board had committed seed capital for the production of the ultimate pictorial story of the Owl House.

The first iteration was completed just days before the 2023 AGM, making it possible for a copy to be delivered just in time for that AGM. I have brought a copy again to this year's AGM for perusal by members who are interested. There have been some great changes since then taking the book to the next level.

Much care and personal commitment has gone into this book by **Elzilda Becker, Merwelene Van Der Merwe** and Team in telling Helen's story. It has been done with passion as can be experienced through their unique interpretation of the light, free spirit and magic of Helen's world. The chances of an initiative like this being repeated in the near future are very small.

Obtaining sponsorship is a key part of this initiative. We have not found the goose/geese with the golden egg/s yet, but continue to follow up leads as we hunt them down. Please pass on any you may be aware of.

It should be mentioned that it is not only the book which is a fundraiser, but also the merchandising opportunities which come with this, for the shop and otherwise.

5. New Owl House logo:

We touched on it last year. Much as we have grown attached to the current OHF logo, the more sophisticated demands of the print media going forward have necessitated a new look at what we have. The reality is our logo no longer delivers the qualities we require.

In this regard we have been extremely fortunate to have the talents of **Eugene Hön** (again) who has had much experience in these matters in his stellar University of Johannesburg career, and who has embarked on a comprehensive study to assimilate all the Owl references of the OH. The result is a logo which, after much deliberation, has been approved by the Board.

Board member **Dr Stefano Nappo**, who is much versed in the realm of Intellectual Property (IP), is finalising the process for the adoption through a trademark search in South Africa.

We would request that anyone who is interested, come and view the logo after the AGM when Eugene will be available to discuss the process and the result.

6. The Crafters precinct:

In my Chairman's report of 2023 I noted the background to the Crafter's Precinct to where we are today. I would encourage you to read it as background to any discussion going forward.

The responsibility for providing traders' stalls within a Crafters Precinct is vested in and acknowledged by the DBNLM.

The OHF in 2019 agreed, in conjunction with the DBNLM, to facilitate the process of drafting and submitting an application for the rezoning of the road reserved outside the OH premises, as well as facilitating the construction of such a precinct.

The rezoning for the road reserve was granted by the DBNLM in November 2022, but almost immediately was followed by an appeal against this decision on 28 November 2022.

Despite the Spatial Planning and Land-Use management (SPLUMA) by-laws requiring that an appeal hearing take place within required dates, and the DBNLM notice that such a hearing would take place on 23 January 2023, this did not happen.

After numerous follow up requests resulting in no action, the OHF has submitted two letters of demand to the DBNLM that the appeal hearing take place by a prescribed date.

In addition the OHF Professional Town and Regional Planner has submitted a complaint to the MEC of the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) to intervene and get the DBNLM to convene the outstanding appeal hearing.

As a result COGTA has been in correspondence with the DBNLM to provide a remedial plan on the matter.

Feedback has been that the municipality is finally in the process of establishing their Appeal Committee/Tribunal.

The DBNLM has advertised to invite applications from persons who are interested to serve on the Appeal Committee. To date no applications have been received. A process of head hunting has ensued, requesting government departments to nominate individuals that could serve on the Committee.

The OHF does not have the capacity to take on the DBNLM responsibility of establishing and managing a Crafters Precinct on its own premises, and does not agree that the Crafters should be housed, temporarily or otherwise, on OHF property.

The OHF will engage in further political interventions to raise the plight of the Crafters on a national and provincial level. Particularly as well as we head to the 2026 commemorative events around the 50 years since Helen Martins passing (see point 8.)

The OHF remains committed to facilitating a humane and dignified solution to the long outstanding Crafters Precinct.

7. Key Finance Indicators for the period ending 30 June 2024:

Despite the challenges facing a small town in the middle of the Karoo, the OHF hung in there and had better results compared to the previous financial period:

- visitor numbers **remained essentially the same** at circa 10,600 for the year
- increased revenue due to **revised ticket sale prices**: R153,546 (up by 19%)

- **increased shop revenue** including a previous year stock correction R160,388
- Total expenses: marginal increase due to frugal management: R22,962 (2%)

As a result the Owl House made a loss of (R83,530) compared to the loss of (R374,508) the previous year.

(Refer to annual financial statements for more detail - circulated with the AGM notification, or on the OHF website.)

Therefore the importance of new revenue streams is uppermost in our minds:

- finding new ways of attracting visitors to the OH
- chipping away at the shop offering - already doing well
- investigating online shopping opportunities
- rolling out the definitive pictorial Owl House Book
- merchandising opportunities related to the Book

The Board welcomes all constructive ideas to raise new revenue and eagerly awaits ideas for our Members.

8. Looking Forward: Helen Martins commemorative event - 2026

In less than two years from now, we will commemorate the 50-year anniversary of the passing of Helen Martins and the legacy that she has left the country – namely one of the biggest collections of outsider art. Miss Helen, as she was fondly called, died on 8 August 1976.

This is an opportunity not to be missed by the Owl House and the town of Nieu Bethesda.

The Owl House Board has recognized this and has already begun to brainstorm opportunities.

These are some of our early thoughts on initiatives as we head to 2026:

- continued restoration of the OH itself and focus on finding funding for work on the Camel Yard. The RHHF grant roll out is an example of this
- establishment of a Memorial Garden on OHF property

- formalising the gifting of a statue of Helen Martins which has been promised by **Angus Taylor**, the significant South African sculptor
- international outreach to obtain recognition of the OH as a global *outsider art* monument
- ramping up the product selection in the OH shop and Crafter creations to support the events
- a plaque unveiling by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA)
- high profile political attendance at a commemorative function
- engaging with the local community on collaborative opportunities (e.g. Nieu Bethesda tourism, businesses & NB Residents' & Ratepayers' Association)
- focused lectures/ discussions/ tours on all matters pertaining to the OH and Miss Helen's place amongst other outsider artists Internationally
- a revised OHF website to accommodate this event

Please let us know of any further thoughts you may have about the commemoration. Two years is not a long time when planning an event of this significance.

The task for us is to continue to protect and position the Owl House as the National treasure it is; the extraordinary vision of Helen Martins.

9. Challenges and Opportunities:

I have discussed the funding challenges under Finance in point 7.

The further training of staff is a matter which is gaining some traction. This is being led by **Chris Maree**. We have had discussions with Dr Anziske Kayser from the Graaff-Reinet museum on a programme to do so in February 2025.

Coupled to this we are cognisant of the importance of having appropriately trained tour guides. We will incorporate this in the training planned for February 2025.

I would again like to request for volunteers from the community to assist in the work of the OHF. Interested parties, please make it known to us, via email/ social media or a visit to the OHF offices.

10. The Owl House Board:

The best for last again, the GREATEST thanks to my fellow Board Directors for their unwavering commitment to the vision of the Owl House Foundation:

- Nils Flaatten (Vice Chair)
- Samantha Graham-Maré
- Bruce Rubidge (Treasurer)
- Eugene Hön
- Daniel van der Merwe
- Stefano Nappo

11. Conclusion:

Helen Martins is South Africa's most important *outsider artist* and the OH must be preserved for future generations.

(Outsider art is art made by self-taught individuals who are untrained and untutored in the traditional arts with typically little or no contact with the conventions of the art worlds. -Wiki)

There is still much work to be done and our quest to share the works of Helen Martins with a wider audience, both in South Africa and globally.

Opportunities emanating from the Helen Martins 2026 commemorative event will be a golden opportunity to do so.

Finally, thank you the members of the OHF for your interest, your feedback and support and – of course – your belief that Helen's work must be celebrated

André Pierre Marais

Owl House Foundation - Chairman

23 November 2024