

## **WHEN SCIENCE JUMPS OUT OF TEXTBOOK PAGES: FIVE DAYS OF FUN AT NATIONAL SCIENCE WEEK**

Learners came in their thousands to the Mondi Science, Career Guidance and FET Skills Centre in Piet Retief, Mpumalanga province, for National Science Week from 3-7 August. Some came from as far as Mbabane, Swaziland and the remote rural areas in the province and neighbouring KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). At the end of the five-day annual science fair, nearly 9,000 learners from 72 schools had participated.

Five PhD and MSc students from FABI represented the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology (CTHB). The five FABI/CTHB team members were Juanita Avontuur, Arista Fourie, Palesa Madupe, Benedicta Swalarsk-Parry and Markus Wilken. With ingenuity, imagination and household items such as cooking oil, soap, old ice cream tubs, water and bathplug chains, the team took science out of the classroom and made it a fun and exciting reality for many underprivileged learners.

Though small, the FABI tent was always full and everyday it was transformed into a science wonderland that held the attention of future scientists and their teachers. On the busiest days learners jostled for chairs and standing room. Those who couldn't make it in the tent or wanted to see the experiments again would patiently wait their turn or peep into the tent from outside. Both learners and teachers looked on in disbelief at some of the experiments and "yiphinde futhi!" (do it again in isiZulu) could be heard at most sessions.

Martha Kutumela, a Grade 6 science teacher from Piet Retief, noted down all the experiments that her group of learners had participated in. She said she would repeat them for those learners who couldn't make it to the fair. Life orientation teacher Phakama Mwelase of Belgrade, KZN, said coming to the fair improved science teaching strategies. "Our school has children with learning disabilities. They learn better when they see and participate in the experiments," he said.

An experiment that at first seemed like magic was a favourite with teachers, centre staff and groups from grades R to 12. It also perfectly reflected this year's theme: the International Year of Light. A member of the team would break a glass tube with a hammer and then put the shards in a glass bowl filled with cooking oil. Playing on the ability of Pyrex glass to refract light, "Benny the Magician" would then fish out of the oil an intact glass tube (immersed beforehand but unknown to the learners), supposedly put together again by

magic! By the end of the week the FBI team had convinced many who initially believed in magic by showing them that they could use science to explain the world around them.