

CHAMPIONING MEANINGFUL CHANGE

Ingrid Louw, CEO of aware.org.za, is committed to reducing alcohol-related harm through a strategic programme of intervention and education

With a career spanning 30 years in education, corporate communication, entertainment, leisure, broadcasting and now, social responsibility, Ingrid Louw has always been at the forefront of change in South Africa.

Louw is the CEO of aware.org (The Association for Alcohol Responsibility and Education), a registered nonprofit, public benefit organisation (PBO), which focuses on preventing the negative consequences of alcohol abuse. The association's members include leading manufacturers and retailers of alcoholic beverages in South Africa. Formerly known as the ARA, the organisation relaunched as aware.org in 2017, along with renewed dedication and a refreshed strategy, new identity and most notably, a new name.

Prior to her work at aware.org, Louw spent 10 years as a teacher in Durban, before moving to Johannesburg to continue fulfilling her passion for education at an Eldorado Park school. Through her teaching, she realised the importance of playing a meaningful part in early childhood development and intervention, as well as socioeconomic factors, in changing the trajectory of a child's life.

This has greatly informed the choices she and the organisation have made in their approach when strategising initiatives.

"Systemic structures such as poverty, unemployment and inequality are ever active catalysts in people's drinking behaviours. Our mandate at aware.org is to reduce alcohol-related harm in South Africa."

"Alcohol harm reduction for us means looking at the triggers of these unfavourable behaviours and increasing intervention for individuals," Louw explains.

Aware.org's initiatives target vulnerable youth and adults of all races and its strategy is a hybrid model that looks at on-the-ground interventions for those who are at risk of suffering the negative consequences of alcohol abuse and misuse.

"Dealing with alcohol abuse and the harm it causes means addressing the core issues and factors." – Ingrid Louw

INGRID LOUW

EDUCATION MAKES THE BIGGEST IMPACT

Being a mother and former teacher, Louw believes in the importance of properly educating and informing children's relationships and perception of alcohol before they reach drinking age. Through her direction and leadership, the organisation has made a strategic shift that has changed how it fulfills its mandate and aligns with stakeholders at various levels.

The organisation also employed a partnership model with government, which the organisation credits for its success.

With the help of its members, industry stakeholders and government, aware.org has rolled out several impactful programmes, as well as a series of consumer

education and awareness campaigns. These have been designed to make a sustainable difference, targeting Drinking and driving/Walking, Underage Drinking (UAD), Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and Binge drinking – one of the biggest topics at the moment in our country.

"Of all these pillars, educating children about alcohol before they reach legal drinking age is where we believe we can make the biggest impact if we want to change long-term behaviour," says Louw. "Dealing with alcohol abuse and the harm it causes means addressing the core issues and factors. This has influenced the direction and trajectory of the organisation's initiatives."

"Some of the feedback we got while conducting our school programmes came from the children and students telling us to speak to their parents. This confirmed what we had already known, that alcohol consumption habits are introduced to children in the home through parents, caretakers, and older siblings," Louw adds.

The organisation seeks to tackle UAD and FASD by addressing the existing attitudes and perceptions held by children that are informed by interactions with the substance by their parents, caregivers, and older siblings.

"The conversations about alcohol at home vary and normalise attitudes towards alcohol. This can prove to be harmful as children grow. What we have done by including the community is to design programmes and campaigns that show



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some of these habits and behaviours so as to inspire reflection and spark conversations in homes among adults," explains Louw.

Louw's leadership directs the organisation's approach and interaction with the communities they engage with, adding an element of nurturing and care that is necessary to address a subject – alcohol consumption – that is almost taboo to talk about.

Kindness, compassion, and her nurturing/mentoring spirit are what Louw says she wants to be remembered for.

"A little while ago, my son told me he wanted to get a tattoo. I was initially against it for personal reasons, but I eventually told him he could go ahead. On the day he got inked, he came back and showed me. He had the word 'compassion' written on his arm," she shares.

FINDING NEW WAYS TO ENGAGE

Louw and aware.org are acutely mindful of the work that still needs to be done. Louw says the South African lockdown regulations were unique in that they immediately banned the sale of alcohol, adding a different element of challenges to campaigns that speak to responsible drinking. Finding meaningful ways to continue to educate and change perceptions that are rooted in many social relationships, and often in childhood learnings, was a challenge that Louw overcame.

While the coronavirus pandemic will inevitably change how they engage with communities and learners in schools, aware.org is determined to make a tangible and meaningful impact in the alcohol harm reduction sphere. Adopting interventions and messaging that are practical and relatable to their audiences is just one of the ways this incredible woman is leading the charge once again. ■

For more information:
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 association for alcohol responsibility and education