

# TOUWS RIVER

## ADVICE OFFICE



Touws River, more commonly referred to as Touwsrivier, is a former railway town 182km from Cape Town, 82km north-east of Worcester and 54km west-south-west of Matjiesfontein. It was originally built in the late 1800s as a station for the main railway line between Cape Town and the newly discovered diamond fields in Kimberley. The town is named after the Touws River. "Touws" is the Khoi word for "ash" which locals say describes the predominant colour of the river.<sup>1</sup>

There are 8126 people who live in Touwsrivier 84,91% who identify as Coloured, 7.52 % who identify as Black African and 6.67% who identify as White. Afrikaans is the main language spoken by 93% of the population<sup>2</sup>

More recently in 2013, the town's fortunes have changed with the development of the largest concentrated photovoltaic (CPV) solar plant supplying 22 megawatt-peak (MWp) of electricity to Eskom developed by the French company Soitec.

The Touws River Advice Office was established in 2014. The LDA works with the local police and the community policing forum to promote safety on the roads and in the community. Their main focus is to provide paralegal services to farm workers in the neighbouring farming communities. The LDA also plays the role of a community organiser for the local municipality and are regularly called upon to assist with the various community events. They were also involved as community liaison for the Soitec plant supported by the Department of Minerals and Energy.

1. History of Touws River – The Karoo, South Africa. (n.d.). Retrieved October 15, 2019, from <https://www.karoo-southafrica.com/koup/touws-river/history-of-touws-river/>
2. Frith, A. (2019). Census 2011: Main Place: Touwsrivier. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from census2011.adrianfrith.com website: <https://census2011.adrianfrith.com/place/168001>

## FAST FACTS

**NAME:** Touws River Advice Office

**LED BY:** Desmond Bezuidenhoudt

**MAIN CHALLENGES FACED BY THE COMMUNITY:** Unemployment, unfair labour practises, poverty

**MAIN ACTIVITIES:** Paralegal support to farmworkers; youth development

**ADDRESS:** 41 Logan Street, Touwsrivier

**CONTACT:** Phone: 078 075 6260

## A LIFE OF CARE



Rosey Beukes, Administrator Touws River Advice Office.



Touws River Advice Office.



Desmond Bezuidenhout, coordinator with a client.



DESMOND BEZUIDENHOUT

### DESMOND BEZUIDENHOUT USED HIS SKILL AS A TRADE UNION SHOP STEWARD TO FIGHT FOR THE RIGHTS OF FARMWORKERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN TOUWSRIVIER

I was born in Ravensmead in Cape Town. At the age of 5 years old, we lost our house because the woman who looked after us left the stove on after she made us porridge. We moved to Touwsrivier because my mother's parents lived there. The town is located between the mountains and it has a warm and friendly community. In the town there are no jobs and the youth need to seek work outside the town. There are the Extended Public Works Programmes (EPWP) and Community Work Programmes (CWP) where people apply for work.

When I was 21 years old I was married in Ceres where I stayed with my wife's parents. I then started working at the Good Hope Fruit factory as a general worker. Later, I was elected to be the shop steward at work. The organiser of the trade union which I was part of, asked me if I would like to serve on their management team. At a general meeting, I was elected as Vice President of the Union and once you were part of management, you would automatically become part of the national executive committee (NEC) of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) As a result of this, I have had training on different labour laws and workers' rights at the University of the Western Cape and also at Ditsela Workers Education Institute. Because my mother became sick, I had to move back to Touwsrivier.

COSATU gave each member an NEC jacket and I wore it often. Because the community saw me in that jacket, they asked me to apply for a position at the Advice Office. I applied for a position but there was a large list of criteria you had to satisfy before you could be selected. My background in labour counted in my favour and I was one of ten people who were shortlisted. The ten people were then invited for interviews where a panel would give you marks. My background in labour and the certificates I received were a good indication that I knew what I was doing and I was very happy to be appointed as a field worker.

Following my appointment, I immediately took on a CCMA case. It was between Aquila Game Reserve and Peet Meiring. The company said that Peet Meiring used his sick leave maliciously because he did not have a sick letter and he just wanted to stay at home. I immediately referred the matter to the CCMA as an unfair dismissal with misconduct.

That same night, a million rand company loaded some of their farm workers on a truck with zinc plates and poles. The workers had to put up shacks in a village named Zion Park that was outside the town. The workers called me and told me what had happened, and I immediately went to stop the move. I called the police while I was on my way. They helped me to stop the move and to guide the truck back to the farm. When we arrived at the farm, the owner awaited us at the gate. The policeman asked her if she had an eviction order because she could not kick people off the farm. When she answered "no", he said that she had to have an eviction order, and that the trucks would have to take the people back to their houses. We then decided to leave the farm, after she told us she would get an eviction notice. This case went to court but the judge then threw the case out and told the farm owner to sort out her administrative work or come with suggestions.

Two years ago, my wife had a stroke. I had to leave work to accompany her to Worcester hospital. I have to wash her and get her ready and give her food in the mornings before work. Because the work I do helps my community, I had to decide whether to work at home or at the office. I decided I would help my wife in the morning and then go to work. It allows me to do my job and also help my community. Then people do not have to come to my house to complain.

Our Advice Office makes provision for education and training for the youth. It is a good opportunity for our youth to better their lives and create a good future for themselves. For me, as a field worker, it is an opportunity to get our youth into various institutions as well as TVET Colleges. I am pleased that I can offer the youth a good opportunity by doing my job well and that I can also look after my wife.

