

Nokuthula bravely liberates her spikes

Ever since I started to write for *Leadership Magazine*, it has been a privilege to receive feedback, reflections and on occasion, cries for help from our loyal readership

Earlier this year, we received an enquiry through our website from Nokuthula Nkani. She is a teacher based out of Cosmo City in Johannesburg, who had been inspired and emboldened by the 'Question of Leadership' interview I had written up on the very special business leader, Dr Anna Mokgokong.

Nokuthula has embarked on building a sewing school for girls in Cosmo City and this has now grown to 34 students but she was struggling to take it to the next stage. She was desperate for a mentor and any assistance she could attract. She had a story to tell and already, I knew that it needed to be told.

We tried unsuccessfully to meet on my next trip to Johannesburg. It was becoming rather obvious through our exchanges that she was stretched to the limit, but she was blessed with an incredible drive and determination to continue doing her outstanding work whilst having four children to bring up largely on her own.

We arranged to meet on my recent trip to Johannesburg in June. I had not visited Cosmo City for over ten years and it had been transformed beyond recognition. It had stretched out in many different directions and perhaps without the tight and efficient town planning that it had commenced with. However, there was a positive buzz in the air and there were many focused people moving at a brisk and purposeful pace whilst serving their small entrepreneurial businesses.

It was impossible not to be impressed by what adversity can generate.

When we eventually pulled up outside the address she had given me, it did not look like a school or a place of learning. Just as I got out of the car to check my directions, a smart and

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articulate young girl came up and bravely asked me, "Are you looking for the teacher?" I smiled and said "yes". She smiled back and happily skipped away, asking me to follow her. She led me to the gate with 'Talents Fashion Designers and Training School' painted on the wall next to the gate. She soon disappeared inside and out came Nokuthula dressed in a brilliant red traditional African outfit.

At first, I was puzzled as to why she had given me a different address—it was now clear and clever. Whilst being proud of what she had single-handedly built, it was basic and without frills. She was desperate to impress me and maybe a little too aware of the stark conditions

she was delivering her own special brand of rare and unique tuition from.

She rushed out to greet me and we hugged each other as though we were long-lost friends. In an instant, we were surrounded by a number of young women all dressed smartly in blue. They were her students and they were bursting with pride and were on their best behaviour. Every one of them had a story to tell and each story was all about the generosity and guidance that Nokuthula had given each of them.

We soon went inside so that they could show me the classroom, the cutting rooms and the banks of small sewing machines, which made up this academy for young talented women. Nokuthula was quite emotional and she was still pinching herself that I was actually here in the small cramped rooms, which were all spotless and primed for learning.

Nokuthula's mother is South African and her father is from Zimbabwe. Her father came to Johannesburg many years ago, met her mother, fell in love and he took her back to his home in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Nokuthula was born on the 7th of June in 1964 in Bulawayo.

Her father worked in the police force and, therefore, she 'wanted' to be a policewoman—only because that's what her father did and she felt she had no other obvious choice. Deep down inside, fashion was her passion, but she didn't believe that anyone around her would see that as a successful way forward for her.

She soon met her husband to be, who was also working as a policeman. She eventually shared



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her dreams with her husband and he believed in her and supported her to enter Dallas Fashion College in 1981. She spent a year there and soon realised this wasn't just her dream, it was also a Spike of hers (a standout inherent strength). She soon progressed to go to Harare Polytechnic in 1983 for three years where she studied cutting and designing. Before long, she had started to make clothes for many of the policemen's wives and their families.

By now, her husband had been promoted to Inspector at the Zimbabwe Police Force. She soon found a job in a company that made uniforms—she rapidly learned “by following my heart, things can work out. It didn't pay well but I learnt loads. It also showed me that I could do this work without formal patterns and professional processes.” Her hopes and dreams would never again be denied. Her long standing feelings of inferiority were disappearing—fast.

It wasn't long before her talent for sewing was spotted by a local school and she was employed to teach needlework. “I soon realised that while I loved teaching, I did not like doing it the way they insisted girls were taught,” she said with a sigh. Her dreams were now taking a very different course—she had a new mission and purpose—to mentor and teach girls that they could stand up on their own and she felt

she could help them. But how? She hadn't yet worked that out.

“My husband was soon transferred to Bulawayo and I decided to open a shop in our new house. I had one domestic sewing machine and I was soon working under my own instruction and was making dresses, uniforms and shirts according to my customers' designs—but my first love was still fashion”.

“At the start, it was very tough but soon, through ‘word of mouth’ and recommendations, I was getting uplifting orders for wedding gowns and before long, the word had spread to those who worked for the President”.

By now, Nokuthula had lost her shyness with me and I could feel the positive energy that she was exuding. She spoke with an assurance and a depth of knowledge of her trade, her eyes were sparkling and her smile would just not go away. She now sat down for the first time, underneath a rack of smart and stylish dresses and shirts that she was obviously very proud of.

She continued a little breathlessly, she was speaking faster and more confidently, “word of mouth was very powerful and many loved my designs and dresses. I was to be my own boss for the next eight years—life was good to me”.

Then, in 2012, the economy of Zimbabwe crashed and there was far less disposable

income for anyone to order fashionable dresses or shirts anymore.

“From being busy beyond belief, I was now idle with four fast growing children to feed and look after. By now, my husband had been made redundant from the police force with a significant lump sum and he started his own successful security business. I now sadly, hardly saw him”.

The rhythm in her voice had now disappeared as she played with her fingers. She suddenly avoided eye contact and mumbled softly, “I had to take the toughest decision of my life, as I could no longer depend on my husband to provide for us. There was only one thing for it, to leave for South Africa and find work with four children to feed—this was not going to be easy”.

Nokuthula's dream was unluckily becoming a nightmare, as she packed her things and headed for a life of uncertainty in South Africa. She joined her mother in Johannesburg and, before long, had found a job as a domestic worker, but she still had her dream.

She was somehow managing to send all her children to school and the older ones, following in the footsteps of their hardworking mother, were soon also in employment and able to leave home.



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“My mother generously bought me an old, small sewing machine and I was soon up for most of the night, sewing dresses and shirts again. I didn’t have the same network I had before in Bulawayo, but before long, word of mouth was again starting to help me,” she said.

Nokuthula still had her dream and still had her Spikes going for her. She worked for a compassionate and generous boss, Sarah Jane Bennett. Sarah Jane had noticed that Nokuthula was always punctual and no task was too big or too small.

One day, the curtains in the lounge had a large tear and Nokuthula took them home and repaired them. Then Sarah Jane’s husband’s shirts also needed some repairing and she again took it upon herself to take them home and repair them. Before long, Sarah Jane soon realised that Nokuthula had a gift for sewing.

Sarah Jane generously told her friends and, before long, the word had spread (again). Nokuthula was soon working all night, but somehow still turned up first thing in the morning to work for Sarah Jane. Something would have to give.

The work she did on the side enabled her to eventually move to Cosmo City but she was still working all hours and turning up increasingly tired, but her loyalty to Sarah Jane meant she would never ever let her down, as Sarah Jane had been so loyal to her.

One day Sarah Jane mentioned to her that, due to her husband’s illness and his inability

to continue working, they could no longer keep her employed for a full five days. She took this opportunity to offer to find someone else who could do the half day’s while she took the risk-filled chance of going full-time with her designing and sewing in Cosmo City.

In 2015, Nokuthula courageously started her own business. The quality and speed of her work soon brought lots of local demand, especially for weddings. At long last, she could see some light at the end of the dark and lonely tunnel.

“In order to meet the huge demand, I decided to hit both of my Spikes—sewing and teaching. I soon started looking for girls who had the same passion as I had; learning, teaching and sewing. Today, there are now 34 excellent girls in my school,” she said.

Nokuthula provides two courses, one for dress making, which is just six months in duration and the full course, which is 18 months. She has cleverly organised graduation certificates and graduation ceremonies, which are a brilliant send-off for the girls who had persevered and developed the necessary skills to go out on their own. The graduation ceremonies are looked forward to by all the students and this doesn’t just give them confidence, but vitally, gives them the respect of others.

Some of the girls could afford to pay for a small amount of their tuition, but others can’t afford to pay. She gives them work in order for them to pay for their course and because she chooses so well, they soon learn. She doesn’t

just teach them how to sew, she teaches them how to buy the right material, how to make it at an appropriate cost and then teaches them how to charge for their work.

By the time they leave, they are not just seamstresses or dressmakers, they are fully fledged business people.

The day before I arrived, a local butcher who supplied wholesale meat to the local retailers turned up asking for 24 golf-type shirts with their logo on for all his employees. Nokuthula instantly passed the order to her most senior student as a ‘gift wrapped’ opportunity to step out on her own with her guidance and positive support.

As we headed out to take photos with some of the girls who were there on the Sunday, she shared with me quietly and with embarrassment, that she was running out of space and also running out of resources. I promised to tell her instructive story and shared my confidence that good begets good.

There are many Nokuthula’s who follow their passion and live their dreams but they can only do so much. With a little more support, they could do so much more.

As I prepared to leave, Nokuthula hugged me again and said “We are giving young girls skills and even more importantly, ambition. The alternatives are not palatable—this is Girl Power!” ▲

René Carayol