

Case Study 16

# AN EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY

UMZI WETHU TRAINING ACADEMY FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH

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**"IT HAS BEEN  
AN EXTRAORDINARY  
JOURNEY"**

ANDREW MUIR

**UMZI WETHU**

**TRAINING ACADEMY  
FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH**

*“For me, Umzi Wethu is pretty much at the apex of development projects; it is a very good example of consciousness-raising, of giving young people the ability and skills to transform their own lives and spaces.”*

**ALLAN MOOLMAN**, OXFAM IN SOUTH AFRICA COUNTRY DIRECTOR

*“To see how someone who was so-called lost to society, or highly vulnerable and unable to enter the job market, can now earn R8 000 or more and support their households, and even pay for themselves to do degrees and diplomas, that is rewarding.”*

**ANDREW MUIR**, UMZI WETHU FOUNDER

*“Umzi Wethu, I believe, is the greatest idea Andrew Muir ever had, because this programme changes lives. It has changed my life, it has changed the lives of my family, it has even changed the lives of customers as Umzi graduates offer good service.”*

**MASIXOLE MBUQE (27)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2006, PORT ELIZABETH

*“I still believe in the programme, even though I no longer work for Umzi Wethu. I believe in it because I have seen it work.”*

**CLAUDETTE VAN DER MERWE**, FORMER TRAINER AND CURRENT MENTOR

*“To meet a young person, destitute ... and to watch their progress over the year is incredibly rewarding. I often feel a sense of disbelief, listening to these students at graduation, expressing themselves confidently. They have become assertive. Umzi Wethu teaches them to speak their mind.”*

**PINKY KONDLO**, UMZI WETHU PROGRAMME DIRECTOR

*“At a very simple level, the project transforms young people from among the most impoverished and disadvantaged sector of society into effective, independent citizens. These individuals will serve as examples of opportunity and hope to their own families and to the communities from which they came. By proving that highly vulnerable and disadvantaged youth of today can become the leaders of tomorrow, Umzi Wethu sends a powerful message.”*

**ROLEX AWARDS FOR ENTERPRISE**

In one of the poorest regions of South Africa, the Wilderness Foundation is applying an all-encompassing approach to healing to help vulnerable youths become independent citizens. Andrew Muir, executive director of the Wilderness Foundation South Africa (WFSA) and well-known conservationist, created the Umzi Wethu Training Academy for Vulnerable Youth in 2006 to provide vocational training and jobs in the eco-tourism industry for young people displaced by HIV and AIDS and poverty.

Umzi Wethu is a multifaceted intervention programme that focuses on providing young people with a “hand up” rather than a “handout”. It is an extraordinary programme in its structure: not only does it provide comprehensive skills training and guaranteed job placement, but the year-long programme also incorporates health and wellness training, counselling, and wilderness excursions, all within a nurturing residential environment. Andrew explains the reason for such an intensive intervention programme: “The vulnerability of these young people has generally been 18 years or more in the making. I realised it would need something pretty intense and all-embracing to turn it around! By providing a holistic intervention, Umzi Wethu is able to transform vulnerable youth into confident, self-assured individuals working within the formal eco-tourism and hospitality sector.”

In a nutshell, Umzi Wethu, which means “our home” in the Xhosa language, provides a model of training which addresses a range of social challenges. It comprises four developmental components: wellness — to improve the overall health and wellness of the individual; conservation — to improve knowledge and build respect for the environment through active engagement in conservation; social responsibility — to ensure its graduates contribute meaningfully to improve the communities they live in; and economic well-being — which ensures graduates attain a level of sustainable financial independence and stability.

Umzi Wethu was piloted in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape and there are now three academies in operation. The original academy caters for the hospitality industry; the second academy, in Somerset East, provides training for rangers; and, in 2012, a third partner-run academy opened in Stellenbosch. The Sustainability Institute, an international living and learning centre focused on sustainable living, has taken the Umzi Wethu blueprint and is implementing the programme in the Western Cape’s wine region, where it is training students for the hospitality industry.

In December 2008, two years after the first Umzi Wethu intake, Andrew Muir was awarded the prestigious Rolex Award for Enterprise for his work in driving the expansion of the Umzi Wethu Academy model. By December 2013, seven years after the programme’s inception, more than 180 young people have passed through Umzi Wethu’s doors; today they are confident, employable and motivated young adults.



**PINKY KONDLO**  
UMZI WETHU PROGRAMME DIRECTOR

**OXFAM'S**  
**INVOLVEMENT WITH**  
**UMZI WETHU**

*“We see ourselves as supporting the best programmes in the country, and Umzi Wethu sits very near the apex of employment creation programmes.”*

**ALLAN MOOLMAN**, OXFAM IN SOUTH AFRICA COUNTRY DIRECTOR

*“Umzi is an amazing model in that it takes a gamble on a young person, a young person who has already formed his or her attitude to life, but whom Umzi trusts will seize this opportunity to change his or her life. To be able to find yourself at the age of 20 or 25 is an amazing opportunity, but it is still a gamble.”*

**PUMLA MABIZELA**, OXFAM IN SOUTH AFRICA PROGRAMMES MANAGER

*“Oxfam is more than a funder. It partners with the organisations it supports to build capacity at various levels depending on the state of the partner organisation. For the Wilderness Foundation and Umzi Wethu, we have benefited from the continued feedback and support from Oxfam which has led to us developing a much more robust and user friendly monitoring system. This allows us to track the progress of the programme and gather valuable stories from students on their experience and growth.”*

**PAUL LONGE**, UMZI WETHU ACADEMY MANAGER

Oxfam South Africa has been supporting Umzi Wethu since 2007, with the initial funding coming from the Joint Oxfam HIV and AIDS Programme (JOHAP). At that time, the focus was on Umzi Wethu’s activities that related specifically to HIV and AIDS. However, Oxfam in South Africa Country Director Allan Moolman is the first to admit that Umzi Wethu was an unusual programme for Oxfam to support: its approach to HIV and AIDS differed from the type of services (for example, home-based care and HIV testing) generally expected of development programmes in this sector. As Allan says, “The Umzi Wethu model broke the mould of traditional development programmes and that was what made — and still makes — Umzi Wethu so exciting. The Umzi Wethu model advances a high investment in people.”

The Umzi Wethu Training Academy for Vulnerable Youth supports young people whose lives may have been impacted by the HIV and AIDS epidemic, but who have not necessarily been infected by the disease. What attracted Oxfam to Umzi Wethu is the fact it is very community focused, as Allan explains: “Umzi Wethu is all about strengthening the community. I believe Umzi Wethu is having a significant impact, not only in fundamentally transforming the spaces that the graduates move in, but also helping to transform the communities they live in. By focusing on young people, Umzi Wethu laid the foundation for an outreach programme to develop as a natural extension to its existing work. The Umzi Wethu graduates spontaneously bring their new knowledge to their families and communities.



**PAUL LONGE**  
UMZI WETHU ACADEMY MANAGER

“For me, Umzi Wethu is pretty much at the apex of development projects; it is a very good example of consciousness-raising, of giving young people the ability and skills to transform their own lives and spaces. Umzi Wethu teaches young people to be aware of their actions, and the consequences of their actions, within society. Graduates of Umzi Wethu are responsible, in that they are always respectful of their culture and the environment in which they work, but also in that they will challenge rules and situations when necessary. They have developed a critical consciousness, a social awareness which is impressive for people who entered the programme as vulnerable youths.”

Oxfam in South Africa Programmes Manager Pumla Mabizela agrees that Umzi Wethu is a very different project to what Oxfam is used to supporting as part of its “No Longer Vulnerable Programme Framework”. But what initially impressed her about the programme was its focus on monitoring and evaluation. “Umzi has a wonderful system of tracking the young people that go through its programme; tracking the skills training they receive, their attitude to all aspects of the programme, and even what they do post Umzi Wethu. The monitoring and tracking systems Umzi Wethu has in place also allow for the continuous refinement of the model.”

Umzi Wethu Academy Manager Paul Longe has, in turn, been very impressed with the Oxfam partnership, which he says has grown and evolved over the years: “Oxfam’s openness to partners’ ideas and innovations has seen this partnership grow from strength to strength ... and now, under the Oxfam Single Programme Framework which focuses on reducing vulnerability, the Umzi Wethu programme with all of its extensions (such as the Livelihoods programme, the coffee shop and the catering unit) is an even better fit. Oxfam has an incredibly creative approach to organisational development and programming and has brought a number of fantastic technological innovations to the table, including community storytelling which involves basic training in creating video stories to show the value of the work we’re doing. Our staff members enjoy this and now are able to make their own promotional clips when something interesting is happening in the programme.

“Thanks to Oxfam we’re able to continually innovate and grow. We hope that our partnership with Oxfam will unlock more doors in the future which will allow us to see the growth of Umzi Wethu nationally,” reflects Paul.

As for Oxfam, Allan hopes that other organisations will look beyond the conventional and take on the Umzi Wethu model, adapting and modifying the model to suit their needs and to derive maximum benefit from the foundations Umzi Wethu has laid.

**WHY DO WE NEED  
UMZI WETHU?**

*"I read in a UN report back in 2004 that 80% of the world's orphans live in sub-Saharan Africa. I was shocked. This is a massive issue, not only from a social perspective, but also from an environmental perspective. I understand the pressure this can have on the environment, particularly in very poor regions. Orphans are vulnerable, and generally have no other option than to use the resources readily available to them. This can lead to poaching, chopping down of trees for firewood and shelter, and the like."*

**ANDREW MUIR, UMZI WETHU FOUNDER**

*"We are dealing with youths who are facing serious social issues. Most have lost one parent, if not both, and have therefore been through tremendous trauma. How can you train for a job until you have worked through some of the trauma, had a chance to heal some of the pain? We can't just give them job training; we need to care for the whole individual if there is to be any real hope of them holding down a job for an extended period of time."*

**ANDREW MUIR, UMZI WETHU FOUNDER**

*"I am the first person in my family to get matric. I wanted to go to university, but my father, who does not live with us, refused to pay. I knew I needed to create a change in the family pattern, to improve our situation. I wanted to help better our lives. I managed to get a bursary to study computer studies but when I finished, I could not find any work. I tried hard to find work, or even to find a bursary to do some further studies, but I could not find anything. I saw myself not going anywhere. I was lost. Umzi Wethu gave me my break."*

**NTOBEKO NGCALA (25), UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, SOMERSET EAST**

*"Our students come from such challenging backgrounds. To be a part of the process which helps them to grow, to become independent, to become professionals, that is incredible. Students at the end ask if there is anything they can give back to the community that can compare to what Umzi has done for them."*

**ALAN NYONI, REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND CONSULTANT**



**NOMAXABISO MANTO**

UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, RANGER AT PUMBA GAME RESERVE

When the Umzi Wethu Academy was piloted in 2006, the first students targeted were orphaned youths, or youths impacted by HIV and AIDS. Today, the selection has broadened to encompass all vulnerable youths; young people who have demonstrated resilience to hardship and who are motivated, but who simply have not had the opportunity to enter the workforce.

Vulnerable groups constitute a significant proportion of the South African population, according to Statistics South Africa, and the reality is that this group continues to expand as the population grows. Statistics SA reports that “Children and youth respectively comprised 40% and 37% of the total population in 2011.”<sup>1</sup>

The same report also reveals that, “By the age of 22, approximately 52,7% of youths were neither attending any educational institution, nor working”<sup>2</sup>. As they get older, it is these same young people who are at risk of becoming unemployable and falling into chronic systemic poverty. Many of them suffer from a lack of food, and they lack the means to break this demoralising cycle.

The young people in the rural Eastern Cape province, where the Wilderness Foundation is based, are particularly affected by severe poverty and unemployment. The province is one of South Africa’s poorest, with the highest percentage of people living in poverty. Nearly one third of youths live in households in which not a single person is employed. Adolescents living in households without anyone working generally do not have the social connections to find a job, and are therefore unable to “catch the break” they need to enter the workforce.

Added to this is the devastating impact of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, which confronts many of these youths on a daily basis. It is estimated that about 5,26 million South Africans are infected with the virus, or about 10% of the population. The HIV prevalence in the Eastern Cape is among the highest levels in the country, with just under 30% of the population estimated to be infected.

What these statistics don’t capture, but what Andrew Muir was witnessing, was the pain and trauma these youths experienced daily just trying to survive the frustration and sheer hopelessness many of them felt, trapped in an environment of poverty and unemployment.

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1. Social profile of vulnerable groups in South Africa, 2002–2011 / Statistics South Africa. 2012 Report 03–19–00. Page 3.

2. Social profile of vulnerable groups in South Africa, 2002–2011 / Statistics South Africa. 2012. Pretoria. Report 03–19–00. Page 4. Available online: [www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-19-00/Report-03-19-002011.pdf](http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-19-00/Report-03-19-002011.pdf)

As head of The Wilderness Foundation of South Africa, a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1972 by Dr Ian Player and the late Magqubu Ntombela, Andrew also understood the immense healing capacity that the wilderness can provide. The wilderness is a positive force for social and environmental sustainability, and the Eastern Cape has one of the richest natural environments in South Africa. The Eastern Cape's natural diversity is impressive: the province incorporates parts of all seven ecological zones that occur in South Africa and features all three of the country's biodiversity regions. Its diversity is further enhanced by its 820 kilometres of pristine coastline. As such, there is a burgeoning eco-tourism industry with significant employment opportunities.

The Wilderness Foundation operates from the standpoint that modern society has resulted in people becoming desensitised to nature due to city lifestyles and challenges such as overcrowding and urbanisation. "The environment is part of everything; we are a part of the earth and the earth is a part of us," says Andrew.

The Umzi Wethu model has been hailed as a conservation solution to the challenges of poverty and HIV and AIDS. Umzi Wethu targets some of the most vulnerable members of society — youth on the verge of adulthood — and seeks to work with those who show resilience and ambition but who lack opportunities to access training and jobs. On completion of the Umzi Wethu programme, these students are transformed into highly employable, confident, young adults.

**THE UMZI WETHU**

**TEAM**



**MISELWA NOGQALA**

UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2011, PORT ELIZABETH

*"The people who run this programme, they are angels, miracle workers, they are like mom and dad to me."*

**MANTHO SEHAPI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

*"Each graduate is like my own child. We have nearly reached the 200 mark."*

**PINKY KONDLO**, UMZI WETHU PROGRAMME DIRECTOR

*"It is important we get the right people involved, because we have ONE chance to make an impact. We are packing so much into the twelve months, everybody and everything has to be spot on."*

**PAUL LONGE**, UMZI WETHU ACADEMY MANAGER

*"The team at Umzi are true guardians of their students."*

**TANIA PLAKONOURIS**, EMPLOYER

*"Mama Ntombi gave us the warmth and care we needed. I love her as my mother. She taught me to take a stand. Because of her, in part ... I am a manager. She taught me to be tough."*

**MISELWA NOGQALA (29)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2011, PORT ELIZABETH

*"My life has been changed and impacted by people that saw the potential in me, who were willing to invest in me. I would like to do the same."*

**DANNY SAULS (26)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2008, PORT ELIZABETH

Fundamental to the success of Umzi Wethu, Andrew believes, is the team he has built up to realise his vision. The quality of the trainers and the core nurturing team is exemplary, and all are incredibly committed and passionate about Umzi Wethu and its students.

A few years ago Andrew, reluctantly he confesses, handed over the reins to Pinky Kondlo, who, as the Programme Director, is responsible for building and nurturing the strategic and business partnerships of Umzi Wethu, as well as the sponsoring partners. “Umzi is very close to me and it was not easy to hand over to Pinky, but the fact is, I had to, and I could, and she and her team have developed and refined the model into what it is today. It is wonderful,” says Andrew.

As for Pinky, she lives and breathes Umzi Wethu: “You can’t work on a programme like this without having passion, and patience,” explains Pinky. “As managers, we have to deal with some difficult situations. We need to discipline, but at times it is important for us to step back, to realise that this aggression, this back chat, is their defence developed to protect them from extremely difficult circumstances. Instead of the knee-jerk reaction to discipline and dismiss, we need to remember that we are here to help them, that if we can’t help these young people to deal with the issue, then who can? There is definitely never a dull moment! Certainly, it can be frustrating at times, but the rewards far outweigh the pain.”

Like Pinky, Paul Longe has been with Umzi Wethu since the start. As the Academy Manager, Paul is responsible for overseeing all operational aspects of Umzi Wethu’s three academies (Port Elizabeth, Somerset East and Stellenbosch). He guides the various Umzi Wethu teams, and also plans and co-ordinates the holistic aspects of the programme to ensure everything knits together perfectly. He too has a deep compassion for his Umzi Wethu family. “Not a month goes by without a family bereavement. This is the hardest issue to deal with for me. I find the more involved you become on a daily basis with the students, the more you feel the level and pain of trauma as a result of bereavement. But all we can do is give them support, give them space to grieve, and if necessary to go home for the funeral,” reflects Paul.

The residential team is ably led by Ntombi Kungwayo — or “Mama Ntombi” as she is affectionately called by the students. As Senior Housemother, Mama Ntombi ensures that all the students enjoy the residential experience. She makes sure that the students behave, assigns chores, disciplines when necessary and, in short, fills the role of mother to the students. “Some don’t even know what it means to have a parent,” acknowledges Mama Ntombi. “I create a homely atmosphere for them. For me, to see the changes that happen to them, from when they first come here and don’t want to talk to anybody, don’t want to bond, to when they graduate, excited about their future, bonded with their fellow students, is very rewarding.”

Every year the team continues to grow, and what has been exciting for Andrew is that former students now want to come back to Umzi Wethu as teachers. “This has been huge for me, and it gives me a sense of completion. The value system is entrenched,” explains Andrew.

Lwazi Xinwa graduated from the Port Elizabeth academy in 2009. He is now a Life Skills facilitator at the academy. “I don’t know what I would do without facilitation,” reflects Lwazi. “I do love cooking, but the work I do now is my passion. A student thanked me once for showing him that there was still hope. That was one of my proudest moments. I have come a long way. Umzi Wethu changed my life!”

Lwazi’s story is a truly remarkable story, but also one that is similar to that of many other Umzi graduates. Abandoned as a baby by both his parents, he was adopted when he was five-years-old. Before Umzi “found” him, he was on a path of self-destruction: he was part of a gang that robbed people, he took drugs, and he had no hope for his future. For Lwazi to now be able to share his story with youths that are in a similar situation to the one he found himself in as a youth, and the empathy he can provide, is a powerful tool for Umzi. His story appears on page 59.

**LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS  
FOR SUCCESS**

*“There is a great need for skilled workers in South Africa. There is also an abundance of individuals who – with the right training – could provide these skills. The Umzi Wethu selection process is designed to discover these individuals.”*

**PAUL LONGE**, UMZI WETHU ACADEMY MANAGER

*“Umzi seems to create special people. They seem to know how to choose rough diamonds, and to polish them to allow them to reach their full potential.”*

**TANIA PLAKONOURIS**, EMPLOYER

*“We need to be confident that our Umzi Wethu students will be able to stay in the jobs we secure for them – only then will the programme be successful from a socio-economic perspective. Essentially we are creating ambassadors for other vulnerable youths and orphans to look up to, and see a brighter outlook. Graduates from Umzi Wethu will serve as examples of opportunity and hope to both their own families and to the communities from which they come.”*

**ANDREW MUIR**, UMZI WETHU FOUNDER

*“I was looking for a job because I could not get into varsity due to financial pressures and my commitments at home. I did not want a handout, I needed something that would in the long run sustain me.”*

**MANTHO SEHAPI (25)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

*“At the start of the course, I learnt that we were there because we were vulnerable, that we were displaced youth. That made me feel like I was a stigma [disgrace]. But then Paul explained what it meant to be vulnerable – that there was perhaps an absence of love, of a parent, of security – and then I understood that I was vulnerable.”*

**MANTHO SEHAPI (25)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

Over the years, Umzi Wethu has developed a sophisticated selection process to recruit the most suitable candidates for the programme. As Pinky Kondlo explains, the importance of this process cannot be underestimated as the success of the programme is largely based on choosing the candidates with the most potential to succeed.

It costs about R85 000 to put one student through the year-long programme. It is therefore essential that the young people chosen have the aptitude and the potential to not only see the programme through, but to also be capable of securing and maintaining full-time employment post-Umzi Wethu. In addition, they need to serve as examples of opportunity and hope to both their own families and to the communities from which they come.

A selection panel thoroughly assesses each candidate, taking into account their physical, emotional and psychological health, as well as their unique history and background. "We are very conscious right from selection about the vulnerability aspect, as all our candidates come from under-privileged environments. The youths we identify need to also possess personality, to make them the right candidate for success. We need to produce quality candidates," explains Pinky.

The selection criteria are fluid enough to accommodate the unique circumstances of each candidate, but where they do not waiver is in the requirement to have completed school. On the surface, this may appear to be a particularly harsh requirement, as many of the targeted candidates struggle to attend school due to circumstances beyond their control. "Those that have not passed matric may be more vulnerable, but they are also probably less capable of achieving educational outcomes," says Pinky. "Due to personal circumstances at home, without intervention, they may not be able to reach their full potential, but it is important that candidates that do enter the programme are able to make the most of this opportunity."

However, the Umzi Wethu team recognised that there were too many people they could not help: "There are so many young people out there doing nothing. What happens to those who are not selected to attend the Umzi Wethu Academy? We wanted to help them find a pathway for themselves," recalls Pinky. And hence the seed was planted to create Umzi Wethu Livelihoods, a five-week job readiness and life skills programme that equips a broader group of young people with the skills to find employment. While not as comprehensive as the Umzi Wethu residential programme, Livelihoods teaches its students about professionalism and work ethics, combining a wide range of key job-readiness skills with a comprehensive life skills programme. Like its parent Umzi Wethu, this relatively new programme is built on the same holistic principles and includes a wilderness trail together with emotional and physical

**PONTSO TSATSI**

(LEFT - MOTHER OF MANTHO)

**MANTHO SEHAPI**

(RIGHT - UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH)



wellness workshops to provide youth with an opportunity to reconnect with their inner selves and the world around them. The main difference is that it is not residential and it is not focused on any particular vocation. Rather, it is preparation for entry into the world of work. “We help them to become the best employees they can within a short timeframe. We also help them to find employment, encouraging them to follow a vertical career path,” explains Pinky. Since the pilot programme was launched in 2011, approximately 300 students have graduated from Livelihoods every year. About half of the graduates find work as a direct result of Livelihoods. And, since 2013, Livelihoods is a pre-requisite to apply for the Umzi Wethu programme.

Another unique, but critical, aspect of the Umzi Wethu selection process is the Wilderness Trail, which represents the final stage of the candidate selection process. Candidates for each intake are required to attend a three-day, two-night wilderness trail, which provides the Umzi Wethu selection team with a deeper insight into the calibre of the youths. Taken out of their comfort zone, they are forced to face their fears: of the bush, of the dark, of sleeping in the open without shelter, and their fear of animals, insects and snakes. They are also expected to walk long distances through the bush, to cook, to clean and to work as a team member.

Once candidates have reached the Wilderness Trail stage of the selection process, they have met most of the criteria necessary to enter the Umzi Wethu programme, but the trail allows the guides to get a better sense of each candidate’s abilities. By observing how they handle an environment that is unfamiliar to them, and that strips away their defences, the guides can see the candidates’ inner personalities. It is here that the final eighteen candidates are chosen for the next Umzi Wethu intake.



**DANNY SAULS**

UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, PORT ELIZABETH 2008

**HOME**

**AWAY FROM HOME**

*"I realised that I am special here, I found that love, that comfort, that encouragement that I did not get at home."*

**WENDY MBOLEKWA (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2013, PORT ELIZABETH

*"Coming into the residence, sharing a room with five other girls, definitely had its ups and downs, but I wouldn't change the experience. In residence, I felt like a teenager. I had never experienced this. I was given chores, I was in charge of my own education, I had a taste of what it was like to be at varsity. I could stay in bed and not worry about food, about my sister. I could be me."*

**MANTHO SEHAPI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

*"Living in a residence, eighteen of us in one house, with different personalities, different backgrounds, it was tough. But we learnt how to compromise. It taught me to understand and connect with other people because in this country, many of us don't trust each other."*

**MISELWA NOGQALA (29)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2011, PORT ELIZABETH

For the 12 months that the students learn at Umzi Wethu they are required to live in residence. Here they are provided with a secure home environment, free from the pressures and challenges of their home life. Graduates reflecting on the residential aspect of the programme unanimously express gratitude for the sense of security, the feeling of being cared for, and even for the discipline they received from the housemothers.

Ntombi Kungwayo has been the housemother at the Port Elizabeth academy since the beginning. She firmly believes that the role of housemother is fundamental in helping transform the students into the confident individuals they become by the time they leave Umzi Wethu. "Some have no parents, or parents who abandoned them. Some have to look after their younger sisters and brothers, and others are looking after their own children. Most had to be adults before they could be children. For us to give them motherly love is a huge thing, it is how they can grow again. They now have somebody taking care of them, listening to them, believing in them. This is so important, and it is what makes Umzi Wethu so genuine and wholesome."

Mama Ntombi admits it can be a tough job. The housemother has to be a strong, consistent role model for the students, providing both love and discipline. "Sometimes their behaviour hurts me, but I know that as much as they are hurting me, I cannot be angry with them, I cannot let them know they are hurting me. Instead, I have to tell them that I care, but what they are doing is wrong, and that I won't stop until they stop this particular behaviour. As housemothers, we cannot let them walk all over us."

Mama Ntombi adds that discipline is also often necessary to bring harmony within the residence. "We have 18 students who have been brought together from different backgrounds, different beliefs and different thinking. If there is no discipline, it is unlikely that common ground will be found. The students need to be taught to respect each other, and this understanding of their fellow students puts them in a better position to deal with life after Umzi Wethu."



**WENDY MBOLEKWA**

UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2013, PORT ELIZABETH

# **TRAINING**

**EXCEPTIONAL EMPLOYEES**

*“We found in our interaction with Umzi Wethu that, almost to a person, the graduates are confident, they are articulate. They know what they believe their space should look like and they are able to chart a course to get what they need. Graduates of Umzi Wethu are also held accountable for their decisions, their mistakes, and they are taught to take responsibility for their decisions.”*

**ALLAN MOOLMAN**, OXFAM IN SOUTH AFRICA COUNTRY DIRECTOR

*“I am thankful to Umzi for the skills it gave me. Today I am a professional cook. I have qualifications, skills, and I am confident of my future. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning I realise there is no more Umzi, I feel nervous, but I know Umzi has prepared me, equipped me, to deal with the pressures of real work. I know I will shine. Maybe in 10 years’ time you will come to my own restaurant.”*

**BUNTU DYANTYI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2013, PORT ELIZABETH

*“Some people have a fear of working in the front of the restaurant, a fear of dealing with people. But this is a service industry, and they need to overcome this fear, particularly if we are to help them realise their full potential.”*

**CLAUDETTE VAN DER MERWE**, FORMER TRAINER AND CURRENT MENTOR

*“If the work market is saturated, I encourage them to be entrepreneurs, to help them find a niche in the market. They can make cupcakes for a church fete, bake bread to sell to the community, there are plenty of opportunities.”*

**CLAUDETTE VAN DER MERWE**, FORMER TRAINER AND CURRENT MENTOR

*“Umzi Wethu gave us skills that allow us to put food on the table. They made us believe in ourselves, that we had something to offer.”*

**MASIXOLE MBUQE (27)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2006, PORT ELIZABETH

*“Thanks to Umzi, I am a more professional person. Umzi is not a university, it is better, because they care for you, they help find solutions to your problems. And there is love.”*

**BUNTU DYANTYI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2013, PORT ELIZABETH



**CLAUDETTE VAN DER MERWE**

FORMER TRAINER AND CURRENT MENTOR

Central to the Umzi Wethu Academy programme is the SETA-accredited vocational training it offers its students. Addressing the need for skilled workers in South Africa, Umzi Wethu incorporates both practical (70%) and theoretical (30%) skills training. To date, the programme has provided two streams of vocational training. At the Port Elizabeth and Stellenbosch academies, students are trained as chefs and waiters, to be employed within the hospitality industry. At the Somerset East academy, students are trained in nature conservation for the tourism industry.

Students are selected from socially vulnerable backgrounds so they have generally never been exposed to the industries for which they are being prepared. Umzi Wethu therefore offers increasingly in-depth exposure to their future work environments. Initially, the Port Elizabeth academy used an on-site, independently run coffee shop to provide practical training. However, it became apparent that a coffee shop did not expose the students to the high level of professionalism and service required by their potential employers — the five-star establishments.

These days, the hospitality students are “thrown in the deep end” by being exposed to a number of four- to five-star establishments for fortnightly job shadowing. Not only are the students introduced to a real-life working environment, but they also meet potential employers. The opportunity to job shadow has increased the skills component tremendously, as Tania Plakonouris, restaurateur and employer of Umzi Wethu graduates, attests: “I have noticed that over the years, Umzi has improved the skills that its students develop. Umzi has recognised its shortcomings, and has addressed them. What is nice about the academy is that it is continually evolving.”

Specialised training in a wide variety of related topics is also provided for the hospitality students. Students learn about five-star service and receive barista and wine stewardship training to enrich their learning experience and better equip them for entry into the workplace. Together with the practical education received in a diverse range of real-world work settings, the Umzi Wethu Academy skills development programme ensures that the students have a well-rounded learning experience.

# THE HEALING PROCESS

*“It is fundamental to the success of Umzi Wethu that we explore the whole person, where he or she came from, how their circumstances have impacted them. The Wellness team takes people out of their shells. We teach them to take the initiative, to be independent.”*

**ALAN NYONI**, REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND CONSULTANT

*“Life skills and work skills have to work together. We can’t give one without the other and expect the students to be radically transformed.”*

**PAUL LONGE**, UMZI WETHU ACADEMY MANAGER

*“Trust is important. The programme is structured in such a way that we build trust. We have learnt to be very patient with our students.”*

**HEINRICH TERBLANCHE**, WELLNESS AND LIVELIHOODS COORDINATOR

*“Umzi teaches its students to have the right attitude, to believe in themselves. Skills can be taught to anybody, but allowing the students to believe in themselves, that is not so simple.”*

**TANIA PLAKONOURIS**, EMPLOYER

*“Wellness taught me that where I come from should not limit me to where I am going. It taught me how to deal with challenges, how to express feelings, it even taught me basic skills like time management, financial management, work ethics. For me, Wellness allowed me to take a step back to get the tools to prepare for my future. I had had too many knocks in my life for my confidence to stay but Umzi helped me rebuild my self-confidence.”*

**MANTHO SEHAPI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

*“I would rather starve than miss out on new clothes ... Financial management is important for us to learn.”*

**MASIXOLE MBUQE (27)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2006, PORT ELIZABETH

*“Family pressure and tradition ensures that you feel bad about saving. There is extreme pressure against saving. If everybody around you is hungry, it is difficult to justify not spending the money but saving it.”*

**CLAUDETTE VAN DER MERWE**, FORMER TRAINER AND CURRENT MENTOR

*“HIV has changed, has evolved in terms of treatment, but there still needs to be a lot done in terms of education, towards encouraging more people to be tested. Sadly there is still a stigma attached to HIV and the infection rate is still rising in South Africa. For preventive measures to work, both men and women need to take responsibility. Men play with the emotions and guilt of women, testing the power of women. Women need to realise it is about them, about their health.”*

**PUMLA MABIZELA**, OXFAM IN SOUTH AFRICA PROGRAMMES MANAGER

Umzi Wethu Academy students bring with them unique problems, complexes, cultural practices and beliefs, all of which need to be addressed if the students are to become truly independent, active members of the workforce. Given their backgrounds, many have experienced trauma in their lives: either the loss of one or both parents or close relatives; rejection and abandonment by significant caregivers; extreme poverty and hunger.

Students’ home environments make them susceptible to external influences such as alcohol and drug abuse, crime and exploitation. They also may not have had the adult role models required to teach them to value things like health and hygiene, or to help them develop a strong work ethic. Core beliefs need to be challenged in order to set young people free from the mindsets which see them perpetuating the poverty of the generations before them, the belief that “my parents are poor, I am poor and this is how it will be for me, forever”. The shift required is underlined by the “hand up” rather than “handout” ethos of the Umzi Wethu Academy programme.



**HEINRICH TERBLANCHE**

WELLNESS AND LIVELIHOODS COORDINATOR

At the Umzi Wethu academies there is a strong focus on improving the overall health and wellness (physical, psychological, social and spiritual) of its students. Umzi Wethu Wellness and Livelihoods coordinator Heinrich Terblanche explains that the activities undertaken during the year's training are designed to help students to get to know and understand themselves. Issues such as conflict resolution and anger management are discussed, as well as how to recognise — and to manage — emotional triggers. The programme focuses on equipping students with the skills to handle failure and rejection, as well as money matters, all of which impact on the student's ability to hold down a job. Even skills such as socialising and how to relate to other people are taught, skills which are particularly important for success in the hospitality industry.

**“Wellness allows the students to release stress, their anger, their frustrations, so that they can focus on their studies,” explains Heinrich. “We are able to talk to them, we have that love, that understanding, that is so important to break down their defences. We discuss vulnerability, the fact that they are at risk of such social evils as drugs, alcohol, transactional sex, domestic violence, abuse. Living in a disadvantaged area means they are more likely to become involved in one of the above.”**

Umzi Wethu counsellor Alan Nyoni adds: “One of our biggest challenges is a clash of cultures. Our students come from an African culture, while Umzi Wethu is founded on a western culture. The Wellness programme has been modified to accommodate the black youth but we do teach our students how to operate as an individual, as they are used to doing things as a group. We teach them to stand their own ground and how to integrate negative beliefs and cultural expectations with reality. We are not changing their cultural beliefs, but rather making them aware of how these beliefs impact their day-to-day lives.”

HIV and AIDS also receive a lot of attention at the academies. While it is not compulsory that students be tested for the illness, Heinrich says many volunteer to be tested at the end of the programme. “Students love it when we talk about HIV. It is a liberating experience for them, to be able to discuss it, and to realise how much they don't know about it,” he says.

**THE WILDERNESS**  
**EXPERIENCE**

*“We are questioned why an environmental NGO is involved in social issues. We firmly believe that nature nurtures. Our students, even ourselves, are so exposed to technology and noise, so distracted by what is going on in our urban spaces, that we don’t have the opportunity to connect with ourselves. When we go out into nature, we are confronted with ourselves, and given a rare opportunity to connect with ourselves.”*

**PAUL LONGE**, UMZI WETHU ACADEMY MANAGER

*“Solitaire gives them the space to be alone, in the dark. Young people are very noisy, but solitaire gives them a chance to be quiet, to listen to their soul, to their spirit. After the exercise they come back to share their experience, their fears, and their joy.”*

**LIHLE MBOKAZI**, UMZI WETHU TRAIL GUIDE

*“To be given the responsibility to hold the torch and watch over the group for an hour while they slept – that was huge, that feeling of being trusted. I did not get this from my family. Solitaire was also very powerful for me. To listen to the inner you, to think where you see yourself, visualise where you want to see yourself, and then to share this with the group.”*

**BUNTU DYANTYI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2013, PORT ELIZABETH

*“The trail itself was so refreshing, it was something else. I learnt that if we take care of nature, it will take care of us ... I remember feeling so relaxed, like I was a child again. I felt my age. I was 19.”*

**MANTHO SEHAPI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

*“I had never been exposed to the bush, I had no idea about conservation. For me, bush did not equal fun ... I never realised you could make a career out of the environment.”*

**NTOBEKO NGCALA (25)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, SOMERSET EAST



**LIHLE MBOKAZI**  
UMZI WETHU TRAIL GUIDE

The Eastern Cape province boasts remarkable natural diversity, but far more tourists have enjoyed the privilege of experiencing these wilderness areas than have the people who live on its doorstep. At the heart of the Umzi Wethu Academy training programme are the wilderness trails that all students participate in. Each student spends about one week every two months off-site at bush camp to experience first-hand South Africa's great wildlife and plant biodiversity.

For Andrew Muir, a committed conservationist, the trails not only expose more people to the importance of the bush and the desperate need for its conservation, but they also demonstrate the tremendous power of nature to heal, to nurture. "I realised early on that we need to break down the perceptions that the "environment" is for "whities" only. It is a part of all our heritage. But you can't talk about it and expect people to change their perceptions. You have to demonstrate it through action, show them, so that they can discover it for themselves. Everybody needs to build their own unique relationship so that nature becomes a special place, not because I've said this is what it needs to give you, but because you've decided it is a place of relaxation and spiritual value, or whatever it is to you. The important thing is that nature then has a value. And that's why the only way to do it is to take people on the experience," explains Andrew.

There are four compulsory trails during the year, including the initial wilderness selection trail in the Kabouga section of Addo Elephant National Park. At the Port Elizabeth academy, the remaining three trails take place in the Woody Cape section of Addo Elephant National Park, at the Groendal Wilderness Area, and finally either at the Goedehoop area of Baviaanskloof or the Nature's Valley area of Tsitsikamma National Park. The Umzi Wethu conservation students at Somerset West only attend two Wilderness Trails (the selection trail and a five-day trail in Umfolozi Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal) because they spend two weeks every month doing practical training in the bush. At the Stellenbosch academy, students visit Table Mountain, Jonkershoek Nature Reserve, and the Groot Winterhoek Wilderness area.

While the trails differ in location, they all follow the same format. Each trail is based on the minimal impact, leave-no-trace principle, so students do not sleep in tents and they must collect and carry their own rubbish. Each trail has an hour of Solitaire, in which the students are taken to an isolated spot where they sit on their own, in the dark, unable to see anyone else. And each student is expected to do Night Watch: to stand watch for one hour while their fellow students sleep, to guard against any predators or other dangers.

The trails provide the students with the opportunity to develop and strengthen their relationship with the natural environment: to reflect on their experiences and future life-paths in an inspiring environment; to be educated on the ecology of the region's diverse habitat; and to benefit from the re-balancing and re-energising effects of the wilderness. In the process, the students learn the importance of making time and space to look inward and question their own strengths, weaknesses, values and goals. It encourages them to take initiative, to persevere, to support their peers and, if necessary, to ask for help.

The intensity of these wilderness experiences brings out any underlying emotional, physical and psychological issues quickly. The "walls" that students have built to shield them from society and to protect them from their fears tend to weaken when faced with challenges in the wilderness. Once these issues are exposed, students are supported by the trail guides during the trail. The counselling and wellness sessions incorporated into the year-long training programme further help individuals to work through these issues.

The trails are a non-negotiable feature of the training, and one that many students initially try to rebel against. As Andrew recalls: "We had a bit of a mutiny once. We went on a trail where it was raining and pouring. The students said they would not go on any more trails. I said it is simple: if you want to stay on the programme you will go on the trail. A few years later, one of those students came back to me and told me it was the best thing I ever did for him, to insist!" Academy Manager Paul Longe adds: "Over the years I have noticed a shift in the attitude to the wilderness experience. Our first few intakes resisted the wilderness experience, were anxious about it. These days it is the highlight of the programme. In fact, they demand to have the Solitaire Hour ... The wilderness trails have a profound influence on our students. They translate the experience into a belief that if 'I can do this, I can do anything'. It is such a powerful tool. They find another level of strength, realise that they can be strong as an individual."

Trail Guide Lihle Mbokazi says it is beautiful to observe the students coming out of their "shells", coming to life. Even a simple activity like sharing stories around a campfire is an incredible experience for the students who, having come from townships, have never experienced such a thing. And hearing these stories, they realise that they are not so different from everybody else, that everybody fears something. "We make wilderness the most beautiful place, not the most feared, for these young people," explains Lihle. "They also start to learn that if they work with their fears, they don't have to let fear stop them from doing things, from achieving things."

# ENTERING THE WORKSPACE

*"I never thought that students with the level of vulnerability we were dealing with could become managers. It is the emotional and financial gains of long-term employment which ultimately reverse their vulnerability. At the Holiday Inn here there is an Umzi student who did the hard graft and he was able to rise up through the kitchen to be second chef. He is an incredible chef. We can't afford to employ him! That's not Umzi, that's him. We just gave the hand up."*

**ANDREW MUIR**, UMZI WETHU FOUNDER

*"You can have all the skills and training, but if you don't have an opportunity to put it into practice, to earn money, then the year has been wasted. The job is not just physical, it is not just about finance, but it is about self-confidence, about upholding self-esteem."*

**PINKY KONDLO**, UMZI WETHU PROGRAMME DIRECTOR

*"This is my first real job. At the age of 26, I should have done this before, but I am here now, and I will make the best with this opportunity I have. ... Yes, there is a lot of pressure [in the real world], but Umzi gave me the basic tools, taught me how to act and react to certain challenges. I have to work even though I am nervous. This industry is tough, the working pace is fast and the hours long. For somebody who is lazy it is quite a challenge, but I am trying my best. Umzi gave me confidence, and I am applying that confidence now. At the beginning I questioned my ability, but I know that Umzi has trained me well."*

**MELIKHAYA JAMES (26)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2013, PORT ELIZABETH

*"It is a hard career but I am lucky. It is who I am, what I am. I believe I have the dream job."*

**NTOBEKO NGCALA (25)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, SOMERSET EAST

*"I don't only rely on Umzi for recruitment, but I do know what I am getting with an Umzi graduate. Umzi creates great ambassadors. It instils the importance of being an ambassador for an industry. I have also noticed that the Umzi graduates have shown the greatest potential to better themselves not only in their career, but to better themselves as people."*

**TANIA PLAKONOURIS**, EMPLOYER

*“Umzi Wethu gives you the tools to get to where you want to go, to be whatever you want to be. The skills you learn here are stepping stones to your own career.”*

**LWAZI XINWA (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2009, PORT ELIZABETH

Another unique offering of the Umzi Wethu programme is that it provides guaranteed job placement with transitional support for its graduates. Andrew Muir and his team measure their success by the number of students currently employed. By mid-2013, more than 180 students had graduated through the full programme. While the employment statistics do fluctuate, generally between 85% and 90% of the Umzi Wethu graduates have remained employed, despite the recent economic downturn. Furthermore, more than 15% of its graduates have progressed into positions of increased authority and responsibility.

When setting up the pilot Umzi Wethu Academy in 2006, the Wilderness Foundation realised that the Eastern Cape was poised to reap the benefits of an upsurge in tourism leading up to and following the 2010 FIFA World Cup, which South Africa was hosting. It also recognised that there would be a significant skills shortage within the hospitality and eco-tourism industries. The decision was made to equip its students with the knowledge and skills required by these industries. The foundation partnered with game reserves, parks and other eco-tourism and hospitality establishments, committing to providing them with high quality, skilled and capable employees, in exchange for job placements. Shamwari Game Reserve, the PE Hotel Group (in particular its Pumba Private Game Reserve), the Lion Roars Group, SANPARKS and the Legacy Hotel Group (in particular its Kuzuko Lodge) have been long-term partners of the Wilderness Foundation, providing employment opportunities ranging from kitchen and wait staff through to field guides and game rangers.

The pay-off is not only that graduates are placed on a sustainable career path, but also that there is now a high demand for graduates from the programme. “Most of our job placement partners have known us for nearly nine years now. They know they are getting employees that are very reliable, and if problems are experienced during the placement, they also know that Umzi Wethu intervenes, helps facilitate. We try and ensure the transition from academy to workplace is as smooth as possible, and we monitor our graduates for a period of 24 months,” explains Pinky.

There are times when employers can no longer employ or retain graduates. In 2011 the recession hit the eco-tourism industry hard, with a number of Umzi Wethu graduates having to be retrenched. It is a credit to the Umzi Wethu programme that most have found employment again, whether within the same industry or in a different one.

True to Umzi Wethu form, Andrew, Paul and Pinky are not comfortable to leave employment prospects for their graduates to the whims of the economy, and have decided to be more innovative in their employment solutions. In 2009, Umzi Wethu created the Green Leaf Catering Unit, to generate jobs internally. The catering unit employs between three and five Umzi Wethu hospitality graduates and caters for various private and corporate events in the city. In its first year, turnover exceeded R800 000, and the business has continued to flourish.

The Green Leaf Café initiative is a social enterprise development unit of the Wilderness Foundation, linked to the catering unit. The café opened in September 2011, the first coffee shop to be opened in the historic Donkin Reserve in Port Elizabeth. Two years in, the Green Leaf Café is a viable business venture. Miselwa Noggala graduated from the Port Elizabeth academy in 2011 and was appointed to manage the Green Leaf Café. "We had to establish our customer base so my chef made tasting platters which we took around to the offices. We also send out weekly emails to our customers, telling them our specials. My team is excellent. I can trust them," says Miselwa.

Umzi Wethu hopes that the graduates will eventually run the establishments themselves, and the current pilot projects (the catering unit and the café) are structured so that they can become models for franchises. "The idea that we could help our graduates to have their own business, creating wealth for themselves and others, is too good to pass up. We will mentor and provide advice for their first year of business," says Andrew, enthusiastically. "We are always actively looking for opportunities to help build entrepreneurial skills in our graduates."

**IMPACT**

*“Within three years our graduates are economically active to the point where they have “paid” the training costs back – in terms of bringing the money back into their community. And it is sustainable. They’re on their way. Within five years most of them have doubled to tripled their starting salary. Umzi Wethu is a launching pad.”*

**ANDREW MUIR**, UMZI WETHU FOUNDER

*“They become agents of change because they have learnt so much.”*

**ALAN NYONI**, REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND CONSULTANT

*“Umzi gives young women the power of economic independence. By getting a job, these women have dignity and financial freedom. Other women don’t have these options, so they are more likely to take risks. They believe that if they don’t have sex without a condom, then the man won’t provide for them.”*

**PUMLA MABIZELA**, OXFAM IN SOUTH AFRICA PROGRAMMES MANAGER

*“I did not go to school, but I want my kids to have an education, to be able to live the life they want to live.”*

**PONTSO TSATSI**, MOTHER OF MANTHO SEHAPI, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

*“I had a dream to come home at Christmas pushing three trolleys of goodies. I worked and saved towards this, and I was able to buy a washing machine, a microwave, crockery and a wardrobe for my mother.”*

**MANTHO SEHAPI (24)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

*“It is always on my mind that I need to get a degree. It is important to me. Next year I hope to study nature conservation through Unisa.”*

**NTOBEKO NGCALA (25)**, UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, SOMERSET EAST

The success of Umzi Wethu is visible in the success of its graduates. These young people entered the programme with very little going for them: no jobs, no confidence, and no belief in themselves. Yet, today, all have an incredible passion for Umzi Wethu, and a passion for life.

Most students are working, either within their selected career path in the hospitality or eco-tourism industry, or in other careers, like Lwazi Xinwa who is now working as a life skills facilitator and who dreams of one day studying social work. Umzi Wethu has a scholarship programme for tertiary education which, in 2013, was funding six students but there are other students who are studying at tertiary institutions through their own initiative.

Economically, these graduates, who previously could barely support even themselves, are now looking after other members of the community. The dependency ratio per student is generally between four and five people. Port Elizabeth 2010 graduate Mantho Sehapi now supports her brother who is in grade ten, her sister who is studying at university, her parents and her own baby daughter. Before Umzi Wethu, Mantho was at home doing her best to look after her siblings while her mother was in Lesotho caring for her ailing father. There was no income, and no chance for her to either continue studying or to find work. She vividly remembers dividing half a loaf of bread to share between herself, her brother and her sister, with that food having to last two days. Mantho's story is not uncommon; it is shared on page 62.

Not only are Umzi Wethu graduates able to support their communities financially, but they are also encouraged to contribute to their communities in other ways. As part of their responsibilities, all Umzi Wethu students are encouraged to "give back" by volunteering their time and energy in their choice of social outreach initiatives. In this way, Umzi Wethu is able to extend the reach of its life skills and health training, as students take the opportunity to share what they have learnt and what they have experienced with others.

Outreach programmes also give the students valuable experience in being peer mentors in their communities. They take on the responsibility of showing their peers what is "right" and how to look after themselves. Port Elizabeth 2011 graduate Miselwa Nogqala reflects: "We were taught about HIV and AIDS, and these classes spoke to me, made me want to mentor other young children. Whenever I went home, I would talk about HIV and AIDS, particularly to younger children. My friend and I held little classes. I remember one boy always used to arrive late for his lessons. One day I took him aside and I asked him why he was always late. He told me he was helping his mother. We decided to go home with him, to his one-room shack, where he was living with his mother, bathing her, caring for her. He was nine-years-old, and was not going to school because of his mother. We took the mother to hospital, and the boy is now going to school."

Perhaps the biggest impact Umzi Wethu has had on its graduates is that they are no longer vulnerable. Recalls Andrew: "I saw some ex-ranger students at the petrol station recently, who are now working in marine protection. I did not know that. But what I noticed was that the vulnerability is simply gone. It shows you the resilience of the human spirit. No matter how downtrodden you are, if you are given the opportunity and you take it, the human spirit is such that it can rise above most things. And the graduates of Umzi are testimony to that. It is the most rewarding thing to bump into an Umzi graduate."

A portrait of Tania Plakonouris, a woman with short dark hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a red and white horizontally striped t-shirt. The background is a bright, out-of-focus yellow wall. A vertical pink bar is visible on the left side of the frame.

**TANIA PLAKONOURIS**  
EMPLOYER

**FUTURE**

*"I think the future of Umzi is that it becomes its own marketing success story. In times of crisis, which our society globally is in, people hear the Umzi story and they just get very excited. So if that is the future of Umzi that's fine. In order to have that good triumph, in nature, in the world, in society, you need the Umzis to tell you why. The more programmes there are, these become the stories of hope for the future. And what good can that do? More and more now I will bring a sponsor to the academy and I will leave. I know their [the students'] stories are much more powerful than mine. I am just the enabler. My job is just a bridge, that's all it is. They are going to become the future of the programme, in terms of the sustainability of it."*

**ANDREW MUIR, UMZI WETHU FOUNDER**

The Umzi Wethu model is not a static model, but one that keeps evolving to ensure the best possible outcome for its students. While the fundamentals remain the same — its strong focus on wellness, life skills and vocational training, the wilderness experiences, its residential nature — the specific elements are continuously refined to ensure, as Paul Longe explains, "that these 12 months are the best 12 months of the students' lives."

Adds Andrew: "The incredible thing about this programme is that it just keeps evolving, it just keeps growing. We're just so flexible with it. Maybe it's because we are not scripted into a social intervention, a purely socially focused mode. We're doing this on the back of a conservation organisation, so the agenda is open on the social side. There's no script that says you have to do it this way. We can make changes as we go along, and the changes are all for the good of the programme."

In addition, Umzi Wethu has implemented an intense monitoring and evaluation process, thanks to the Ford Foundation and to Oxfam. The Umzi Wethu management team constantly evaluates what the students think, how the trainers are feeling, and the response of the job placement providers. Feedback from such a wide range of role players allows for constructive and relevant changes to be made to the programme. One of the biggest changes that Umzi Wethu implemented is that training is no longer outsourced. This ensures the organisation has a greater influence on the quality of the learning.

The Umzi Wethu Livelihoods programme grew out of the above feedback. Livelihoods has quickly evolved to now be a prerequisite course for all Umzi Wethu potential students. This has freed up time to allow the Wellness Team to focus on other elements such as bringing in a stronger emphasis on environmental education and the message

of conservation. They have also started placing a greater emphasis on financial management, and on HIV and AIDS awareness. As Lwazi Xinwa, Umzi Wethu graduate and Life Skills facilitator, illustrates: "The students today are more fortunate than I was. They have more opportunity for one-on-one consultation. There are more activities encouraging personal growth. Initially Umzi Wethu only offered basic life skills. Today there is more focus on anger management, on HIV and AIDS, financial management, substance abuse, and so on."

The mentorship side of the programme is an extremely important element of Umzi Wethu but one that, after the initial few academies, did not receive sufficient attention due to the logistical difficulties of finding and training mentors. But Paul Longe wants to resurrect the mentoring side of the programme. "I am dreaming big, wanting to get a big network of mentors who can also be involved in the Livelihoods programme. It is not one of the critical success factors, but it is a major plus factor," says Paul.

In line with Umzi Wethu's vision to help "create a world where all vulnerable youth have the opportunity to realise their dreams of earning a livelihood with dignity and becoming caring citizens, within their communities and of the natural environment", the Wilderness Foundation is also seeking to expand the successes of Umzi Wethu. It seeks to partner with organisations capable of successfully replicating the Umzi Wethu model within their specific contexts. The first Umzi Wethu partner-run academy was launched in 2012. The Sustainability Institute, an international living and learning centre focused on sustainable living, has taken the Umzi Wethu blueprint and is implementing the programme in the Western Cape's Stellenbosch wine region, training its students for careers within the hospitality industry.

# GRADUATES' STORIES



**LWAZI XINWA**

UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2009, PORT ELIZABETH, LIFE SKILLS FACILITATOR AT UMZI

## LWAZI XINWA'S STORY

Lwazi Xinwa, 24, was abandoned as a baby and spent his first five years at an orphanage in King William's Town in the Eastern Cape. He was later adopted and lived with his adoptive parents in a township in Uitenhage. His father died in 2000. In 2007 his mother, a domestic worker, became very ill and had to stop work. The following year Lwazi dropped out of school to care for his frail mother. This is his Umzi Wethu experience.

*"My life was tough at the time I heard about Umzi Wethu. I had no clothes for the interview, but I managed to borrow some. It was the first time I ever looked smart. At the interview, I remember feeling very intimidated in the waiting room. I was the last person to be interviewed, my heart was pounding, and I was very tempted to run away. But the Umzi Wethu interview atmosphere was so warm, so easy, they were smiling, and they wanted to know about me. They were the first people to whom I disclosed my history. How they managed to get this information from me I do not know. When I left the interview I felt empowered, but after a day or two, I lost hope again.*

*"Also during this time I felt quite desperate. Many days I could not go to work as I had to stay home and look after my mother. I joined a gang, robbing people, taking drugs. I am not proud of it. My life started going very south. It was south already, but it went deeper south.*

*"When I got the phone call to go on the selection trail, I was so involved in my gang that I was not interested. My mother said to me 'If you don't go to that place, I will kill myself'. I loved my mother, she had always treated me so well. I did not want her to kill herself. But I found another excuse not to go. I told her I had no clothes. I remember my mother disappeared, and after an hour or so, just when I was starting to get really worried, she came back with R500. This is the first time I have ever seen this much money.*

*"I am not proud, but my first thought was to buy dagga. With the money that was left over, I bought tracksuit pants, shoes, and I had a plastic bag with a toothbrush. When I arrived for the trail, I saw that everybody had backpacks, they looked prepared. Again, I felt so small, and I did not participate in anything that first day.*

*"It was during Solitaire that things started to change. At the start I focused on trying to find a way to get dagga and mandrax, but I guess there is only so long that you can think about this when you are in the middle of the bush with no way of getting it. So eventually I started thinking about other things. I now believe there is a spirit of nature. I felt myself connecting with nature. I was scared, but my mind cleared. I remember closing my eyes and feeling that the wilderness was the most peaceful place. I had a chance to cry.*

*“Then they put me on Night Watch. I looked at the people sleeping and felt the trust they had in me to watch them while they slept. The following day I was up and running. I started talking, listening, engaging.*

*“After the trial I was so positive, so excited. But I never got the phone call to say I had been accepted. I thought I had not been accepted. Right then I thought I would kill somebody so that I could go to jail and have three meals a day, so that I did not have to worry about anything.*

*“The next day, I got the phone call that I had been accepted. Again, I did not feel that I fitted in, and I did not participate, but during the process I found myself starting to get along with other people, I felt my self-esteem growing. My stomach also went crazy, having three meals a day. I got very fat.*

*“At Umzi Wethu I grew from strength to strength. Paul and Mama Ntombi are my third parents. Mama Ntombi is a powerful woman. If it weren’t for her, I would have had nowhere to turn to.*

*“In particular I remember my third trail. It was the most wonderful time of my life. It was four days of laughing, swimming, education. When I arrived back at the residence I saw 16 missed calls from my sister. I knew my mother had passed away. I was lost. This was a pivotal day in my life, because on that Sunday, Paul and another counsellor came to me and spent the afternoon with me. I grew up in a township where we believed that white people were not good, yet here were two white people who gave up their Sunday afternoon to be with me and to help me through my grief. The life skills training I had received also helped me to deal with the grief. I was given time off to go to the funeral, and I was overwhelmed when the whole Umzi Wethu Academy came to the funeral.”*

Lwazi graduated in 2009, top of his class. His first job was as the Head Chef for the Umzi Wethu Catering Academy. Within a year he was managing the kitchen. However he realised that cooking was not his passion. He wanted to be a social worker. Paul Longe, recognising this, invited him to observe some of the Life Skills classes. Today he facilitates his own classes, and wants to study to become a social worker. He proudly recalls the day a student thanked him for showing him there was still hope.

*“Umzi Wethu changed my life. Some of the guys in my gang are dead now. That is where I would be now if it weren’t for Umzi Wethu. I have a beautiful son, and I know my future is not going to be my past, but I know that my past has been great for my future,” concludes Lwazi. “I have come a long way.”*



**MANTHO SEPHAPI**

UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, PORT ELIZABETH

## MANTHO SEHAPI'S STORY

Mantho Sehapi, 24, spent much of her teenage years raising her two younger siblings, initially helping her mother, and then, from the age of 18, caring for them solely while her mother lived in Lesotho. (Mantho's father, based in Lesotho, was ill and needed to be cared for.) There was no income, and Mantho could not go to university because of her commitments at home. This is her story:

*"I remember dividing half a loaf of bread to share between the three of us. The loaf had to last us two days. I was feeling desperate."*

*"I was introduced to Umzi Wethu because the social workers at my sister's school noticed that she was withdrawing, that she did not seem well. Because she was still going to school, they looked at me to join the programme."*

*"The selection trail was very different for me. I had seen this type of thing [hiking] on the television, but it was, I thought, for white people. I do remember once thinking that I should have been white as it looked like fun. The trail experience opened my mind. We slept under the stars, and that made me feel very special. ... [Usually] we never look at the stars, we never escape the harshness of the location. In a township, a dress is beautiful, not a star!"*

*"Solitaire gave me spiritual enlightenment. I realised I needed to make the best of my life. It was a wake up call. I also realised there are different ways to make yourself feel good about yourself."*

*"After the trail, I still tried to find work, but I was unsuccessful. It was a heartbreaking time for me. When I found out that I was accepted at Umzi [Academy], it was a "sjoe" [Wow!] time for me. But then I thought, who was going to take care of my siblings, because the course requires that you have to live in the residence. Umzi did accommodate me. I started the course by travelling to it every day, so that I could be home for my brother and sister in the evenings. But later my mother came back, and then I could stay in the residence."*

*"Coming into the residence, sharing a room with five other girls, definitely had its ups and downs, but I wouldn't change the experience. In residence, I felt like a teenager, I was given chores, I was in charge of my own education, I had a taste of what it was like to be at varsity. I could stay in bed and not worry about food, about my sister. I could be me."*

*“Wellness taught me that where I come from should not limit me to where I am going. It taught me how to deal with challenges, how to express feelings, it even taught me basic skills like time management, financial management, work ethic. For me, Wellness allowed me to take a step back to prepare for my future. It gave me the tools for my future.*

*“The training itself inspired me. I didn’t just want to get my certificate, I wanted to earn it with good marks, so that I was not wasting time, mine or those people who trusted in me.*

*“Umzi helped me rebuild my self confidence. I had had too many knocks in my life for my confidence to stay. I also learnt that everybody has a bad day. As a waiter you hear things, and I have to tell you, some of the things I heard helped me to get my power back. I realised that other people have problems too.*

*“My first placement was at Mercantile Hospital, taking orders from patients. It was hard work with long shifts. I would often have to work through my lunch hour. Even though I was supposed to start at 06:30, I started to come in to work earlier just so that I could get everything ready. I know I am a bit slow, but Umzi Wethu taught me to be professional, to take responsibility, so I came in earlier to give me time to sort out the cutlery, the crockery.*

*“After this job, I was able to get a job as a waitress. It is also a hard job with long hours, but the tips helped me. I have changed jobs again, and now work as a chef for Bridge Street Brewery. I start work at 08:00, and sometimes only get home at 03:00. It is tough, but I hang in there. Here at Umzi you are taught not to be a quitter.*

*“I had a dream to come home at Christmas pushing three trolleys of goodies. I worked and saved towards this, and I was able to buy a washing machine, a microwave, crockery and a wardrobe for my mother.*

*“Umzi is home. It is all about support, and there is plenty of that at Umzi, even now that I have left.”*

In early 2013, Mantho was promoted to Senior Chef at the Bridge Street Brewery, and was supporting both her parents, her siblings and her own baby. Later in the year she was approached by a local bed and breakfast establishment to be its junior manager.



**NTOBEKO NGCALA**

UMZI WETHU GRADUATE, 2010, SOMERSET EAST

## NTOBEKO NGCALA'S STORY

Ntobeko Ngcala, 25, lived with his grandmother and older brother in Eastern Cape's Kwanobuhle township. His mother lived and worked in Johannesburg. His grandmother did not work. He was introduced to Umzi Wethu through the Wilderness Foundation's Pride programme, a series of projects which introduces previously disadvantaged primary and senior learners to a one-day, entry-level outdoor experience. The experience is designed to help stimulate the learner's interest in his or her immediate natural environment and to be concerned for its preservation and conservation. This is Ntobeko's story:

*"My mother could only find work in Johannesburg and even though she sacrificed all her earnings to support us, we still struggled."*

*"I remember I was in Grade 10 when the Wilderness Foundation visited to collect students to do Pride on Saturdays. I was in the first group to go out. I had never been exposed to the bush, I had no idea about conservation. For me, bush did not equal fun. I had always loved watching wildlife programmes, but I saw it as a 'white thing'. Also, I had been taught that the bush was a sacred place for our ancestors, a place of witchcraft. There were many cultural beliefs attached to the bush. I never realised you could make a career out of the environment."*

*"I enjoyed the whole Pride experience, and myself and my two friends promised that we would sneak in to every other trail. We did, and I started chatting to the guides. Eventually they invited us to attend a one-week course so that we could volunteer on the weekends to do the Pride trails. We did."*

*"I finished matric. I am the first person in my family to ever get matric. I wanted to go to university, but my father, who does not live with us, refused to pay. I knew I needed to create a change in the family pattern, to improve our situation, I wanted to help better our lives."*

*"I managed to get a bursary to study computer studies. It was a one-year course, and when I finished, I could not find any work. I tried hard to find work, or even to find a bursary to do some further studies, but I could not find anything. I saw myself not going anywhere. I was lost."*

*"Eventually I spoke to Lihle (Umzi Wethu Trail Guide) in frustration. She knew me, knew my determination, and she realised that I needed a break. She gave me my break."*

*“During the course we were deployed in different reserves. It was such a different experience. As students we did get the nasty jobs, but Umzi had prepared us both mentally and physically to handle the challenges of the bush. I was psychologically fit, and I had the right attitude. I was well prepared to face the challenge.*

*“Today I work in Shamwari as a field guide. It is a hard career but I am lucky. It is who I am, what I am. I see my future in this industry, but perhaps not always as a field guide.*

*“My biggest challenge at the moment is to further my studies. I did start a management course, but it was too difficult to study with my work shifts. It is always on my mind that I need to get a degree. It is important to me. Next year I hope to study Nature Conservation through Unisa.*

*“My family is very grateful to Umzi Wethu. I am doing something very different, and they have been impressed with how professional my job is. I have been able to buy my own car, and now I hope to buy a house. Umzi taught me not to live in debt, so I am saving every day.”*

Ntobeko says he is incredibly grateful to Umzi Wethu, and whenever he has time off he volunteers as a Pride guide. “Pride opened up opportunities I never could have imagined,” concludes Ntobeko.

**A POSTSCRIPT  
FROM THE AUTHOR:  
ALEXA SCHOOF MARKETOS**

The five days I spent at Umzi Wethu's Port Elizabeth academy were some of the most inspirational, emotional and affirming days of my life. I met Andrew, Pinky, Paul, Lihle and Mama Ntombi, as well as Heinrich, Alan and Lwazi from the Wellness team, people who are so incredibly, and genuinely, passionate about the programme, and who care deeply for their students.

Here is a team of people who really understand the meaning of holistic training. They understand, and can see through, the defences their students have built up over the years to shield themselves as best they can from more hurt. The aggression, the cockiness, the surliness, and the shyness — the team looks past these negative behaviour patterns to unlock the “real” person behind the façade. The patience this requires, the commitment, is to me astounding.

Yet the proof is in the pudding, so to speak. During the week I met with about ten graduates, all of whom impressed me with their confidence, their charisma, and their passion for the Umzi Wethu programme. Their belief in themselves is remarkable, and it was often difficult for me to reconcile the positive, articulate person sitting in front of me with their account of the person they were before Umzi Wethu. Listening to their stories was often a roller coaster of emotions for me, disbelief at how they could have survived the traumas they had experienced, and impressed at how Umzi Wethu was able to recognise their potential, and to realise this potential.

I think what struck me the most was the ability of the Umzi Wethu programme to build trust, and to restore the students' belief in themselves. And it was the most simple gestures that achieved this. Yes, the programme is designed to build trust, but for Lwazi, for example, it was when Paul spent a Sunday afternoon with him to console him after his mother's death. For Mantho, it was when Mama Ntombi stood up for her after Mantho had been involved in a physical fight with her boyfriend. For Buntu, it was Lihle's unswerving belief that he could climb a mountain. For Miselwa, it was Paul's patience, the fact that he never judged her for her numerous angry tirades.

The Umzi Wethu Training Academy for Vulnerable Youth is an impressive programme and one I sincerely hope is embraced by other organisations and individuals, to either support this worthy cause financially, or to be brave and implement this programme in their own community. The support is there, the structures are there, the students are waiting. It simply requires commitment.

**JOB**S SOCIETY **FUTURE**  
POSITIVE

**REWARDING ACADEMY**

**CREATING YOUTH**

**TRAINING**

**EXPERIENCE OXFAM**

**UMZI** **EXCEPTIONAL**  
**WORKING LEARNING**

**WETHU GRADUATE**

**SUCCESS CHANGE**  
**PROJECT**

**PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT**



**OXFAM**