



Developing talented performing artists

Nqobile Mbatha is a young woman from rural Hlabisa in KwaZulu-Natal. Now 23, she has already faced many trials in her life. She lost her father at a very young age, and then as a teenager her mother died of TB. At the age of 21, she suffered the further loss of her younger sister. Left alone, with little to call her own, her prospects seem gloomy. Yet Mbatha is optimistic about her future.

Through its Arts and Culture Portfolio, the MTN SA Foundation has undertaken to empower and develop 70 performing artists in six areas of South Africa. One of these areas is Mbatha's hometown, Hlabisa.

Mbatha started performing while in high school where she discovered her talent for music, singing, dancing and acting. On leaving school, however, there were no opportunities in rural Hlabisa to continue developing this interest – until April 2012 when the MTN SA Foundation provided an opportunity through its Performing Arts Programme, run in partnership with KwaMashu Community Advancement Projects (K-CAP).

K-CAP is run by Edmund Mhlongo, a visionary who founded the organisation with the goal of creating jobs through empowering disadvantaged youth in

integrated arts and multimedia skills. At the Foundation's request, Mhlongo identified ten promising performance artists, out of 90 applicants, to participate in the seven-month rural training programme which was also supported by both the Hlabisa municipality and the Foundation's local BSC.

The strict training programme consisted of bi-monthly workshops, with set work and projects to complete between each workshop, focusing on developing not only the core skills of dancing, singing and acting, but also scriptwriting, directing and management skills. Mhlongo began the process with a workshop on goal setting. "The youth in these communities often get into trouble with teenage pregnancy and drugs, because they don't see a future to protect. The first workshop helps them to set three goals to work towards," explains Mhlongo. This process had a great impact on Mbatha: "When you set a goal you always have to achieve it. This helped us to keep going through difficult times, because we knew we had a purpose," she says.

In addition to performance techniques, the artists were taught about the performing arts industry – what skills are required and how they measure up against these requirements. This process was further enhanced with a



five-day excursion to Durban where the performers saw productions and had the opportunity to meet people from the industry.

The programme culminates in a production that is written, directed and acted by the performers themselves. Mbatha describes how her group chose their theme, which addresses the challenges that councillors and traditional leaders face in working together: "We decided to focus on something that people don't know about in rural areas. Our play also gives a solution to the problems, and we really want to be able to perform this for the councillors and indunas so that they can see."

The knock-on effects of the programme are now starting to be felt. Beyond the work required for the MTN SA Foundation programme, the participants

have started teaching drama in the local schools. Furthermore, Mbatha says she and most of her fellow participants have resolved to pursue a tertiary education in performing arts.

The programme has highlighted the significant economic potential of the performing arts for rural people and the need to create opportunities in these areas. The MTN SA Foundation is therefore extending the programme into a second phase to further develop the performers' skills and to give them all-important access to performing opportunities.

From Mhlongo's professional perspective, a project like this is invaluable to the South African performing arts industry. "We have talent," he says, "but without skills and training, talent is useless."

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Nqobile Mbatha, Emerging performing artist, Hlabisa, KwaZulu-Natal