

# Broadening the horizons of Mpumalanga's matrices

 By Leigh Andrews, issued by SAICA

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Chartered accountant (CA[SA]), Peace Mabaso is a financial manager at FNB's private bank lending business unit, as well as executive member of the Ekulindeni Reunion Foundation (ERF). He's a shining example of a CA(SA) flourishing in the office while also helping others step onto the road to success. But Peace wouldn't be where he is today without several boosts from SAICA's Thuthuka programmes - the first of these when he was still at school.

## From rural beginnings to relishing big city life

Peace ponders: "Imagine the number of talented rural learners whose potential is not realised. Could this be the key to fix the skill shortage in our country?"

He's living proof that this may well be the answer.

Peace was raised by his grandparents who were small business owners in Ekulindeni, a small village in Mpumalanga. This because his mom, who had conceived him at the age of 16, left her village to find a job in the city herself the fourth of eight children and the first to complete matric.

With a population of less than 4,500 and almost zero economic activities in the village, the thought of an education beyond high school was only a dream to Peace. Indeed, the only high-profile careers in the community were teachers, nurses and policemen.

That all changed when Peace attended the 2017 Thuthuka development camp in Mpumalanga. While normally an initiative run was for grade 12s, Peace's h



Peace Mabaso

maths teacher motivated for his attendance despite him only being in Grade 11...

It was here that Godfrey Legwale, SAICA's project manager running the province's development camp took a liking to him, saying: "Peace, I'm going to make you a CA."

And thus, the starting blocks of this fairytale fell into place with Peace attending the camp again the following year and scoring top marks among the learners there. He went on to attend two more SAICA development camps as a group leader and another as a guest speaker, describing all five instances as 'incredible'.

The camp's maths and science classes are delivered by some of the best teachers in South Africa, which is crucial says Peace as learners from rural areas generally receive below-standard education, with poor infrastructure. The week-long camps go beyond the basics to include exam techniques, as well as fun exercises that instil social skills and the power of teamwork, the importance of a healthy lifestyle, and analytical and soft skills like preparation, which Peace still applies to his everyday life and credits with the reason he achieved 99% for maths in matric maths

Peace also applied to universities for the first time at the camp and found many of his fellow campers were in the same boat – experiencing in just seven days what learners from cities and private schools experience on a daily basis.

Yet despite this sneak peek and his strong academic skills, Peace struggled with the transition to university life at Wits, missing his home and finding his new city life too busy.

## **Tools in the Thuthuka toolkit: Life skills and mentorship**

In fact, university proved so overwhelming that he dropped out and travelled back home. Lucky for him, he was firmly on SAICA's radar and was contacted by SAICA's Thuthuka Bursary Fund (TBF) about a study opportunity at the University of the Free State the very same day he arrived home. His 'blood has been Thuthuka since that day'.

Thanks to TBF's holistic wrap-around support model, Peace and other beneficiaries like him are effectively "adopted" by the bursary – which, feeds them and gives them shelter and grooms them throughout their studies for life after university. Indeed, explains Peace, TBF even helps secure beneficiaries a job after university by arranging training contracts with their partners – in Peace's case at KPMG- after completing their post-graduate degree.

The transition from university life to the working world was another intimidating one, but once again Peace coped thanks to the TBF support network. he shackled up with fellow Thuthuka alumni until he could afford his own apartment, completed his training, went on to become an audit supervisor at KPMG – the best experience of his life so far. Having passed both his board exams by 2016, Peace registered with SAICA at the beginning of 2017 and thereafter joined FNB as a project accountant, and was promoted to finance manager within 14 months of joining the bank.

Despite his clear capacity for consistent success, Peace humbly points out that he's had a number of real-life guardian angels guiding his career.

That's why mentorship is one of the most important tools he's had access to, as "walking this journey with people next to you, rooting for you, is a game changer." It means a stumble is just that – something to get up from with the help of others, rather than a journey-ender, whether it's emotional support, advice on your academic performance or being connected with other professionals.

The mentorship he received made such an impact on his life that despite the pressures of his day job, Peace also finds the time to give back to others and is a strong advocate for quality education, mentoring six university students from disadvantaged backgrounds and helping them adjust to and cope with university life, while also giving motivational talks to high school learners from public schools, and tutoring at schools in poor communities.

In addition to his role at ERF – a project close to his heart as it's his home community and aims to improve the quality of education amongst high-performing matric learners in Mpumalanga's rural communities through motivational talks, tutoring and tuition – Peace co-founded the Jabavu Academy, an organisation that provides free afternoon mathematics, accounting and physical science classes in Tembisa, Vosloorus and Olievenhoutbosch.

## **The personally powerful push to give back**

Speaking of the students he's trying to uplift, Peace says: "They remind me of myself – they're doing well, but have no information about what happens after matric. With very limited resources in rural areas, and with almost zero internet access at the time, my talent would have probably gone unnoticed. The Thuthuka development camps are where I first met an actuary, industrial engineer and chartered accountants. The most amazing part? They all looked like me. I was introduced to a wide range of careers, which a child from a deep rural area wouldn't even dream about."

Peace says the problem is further compounded by the fact that the majority of parents in rural areas are uneducated, and have never left their communities, resulting in a sheltered information cycle. That's why Thuthuka initiatives like school roadshows and the annual development camps are essential to raise awareness and make the communities aware of the funding opportunities out there.

He encourages funders to look beyond the numbers – it's not enough to simply grant funding to learners who meet the academic criteria. Instead, he feels we need to go further for greater impact, as the greatest impact is undoubtedly in poor communities, especially in rural areas.

“Who knew a flower could grow from concrete? That a rural boy would one day sit in a boardroom bigger than the house he grew up in, and advise executives on how to improve their business? My life has been such a complete fairy-tale. I still believe that one day I’ll wake up from this dream I’m living,” concludes Peace.

To help turn the fairytale into a reality for others, who may not otherwise realise the opportunities that await them, Peace says: “Think about the people that have helped get to where you are right now. Don’t you feel indebted to the world? Throughout my short stint in life, I’ve met incredible people who have laid the foundation on which I am solidly built. Giving back is my offering, my thank you.”

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh\_Andrews.

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