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*Born into a very poor family, successful business Hlengani Mathebula's life is the perfect example of how you can rise above all problems.*

On 29 October 2009 thousands of students wrote their Life Orientation exam paper. One case study was about Hlengani Mathebula who at that time was the managing executive of ABSA Private Bank, the largest private bank in South Africa.

He is also the newly elected Chairman of the Black Business Executive Circle (BBEC) and Chairman of African Leadership Group.

I visited with him for two hours as he explained his humble beginnings; how he rose above it; how it in fact benefited him. His story inspired me and I trust it will do the same for you.

His childhood days played off in Limpopo where his family was exceptionally poor. At a very young age he snuck into a truck that collected workers for hard labour on cotton, orange and mango farms. In one instance they discovered this young child on the truck and had to decide whether to return him immediately or bring him back at the end of the month when the truck was scheduled to return. He stayed on for the month.

During this period he experienced terrible discrimination. As a result of this and experiences as an activist he views any accusation of racism with a lot of reverence and in my view maturity.

His personal 'scars of racism or discrimination' contributed in moulding him into a leader with a passionate desire to build one prosperous nation, irrespective of skin pigmentation; a secure future for our children and their children.

He was an entrepreneur at a young age, fixing shoes as a self taught Cobbler and taking pictures of functions like weddings with an old warn-out camera and selling the pictures. All this was done to be able to take himself to school.

When such ventures were not sufficient he became a petrol attendant at a station that was about 18km's from his village. He did this at night until about 4am, locked up and then walked back to be on time for school.

Somewhere in the middle of the day he would leave class to take a 'power nap' inside the toilet, only to come back to a hiding because he missed out on a class or two.

Mathebula went through high school without a uniform and his teachers did not even know this. He took an over sized white shirt, cut off the collar part and wore that underneath a grey jersey that he got from a NG Kerk bazaar.

So, while wearing the jersey his teacher would not know there was no shirt underneath. He did this during summer and winter.

His first pair of shoes were size 9 police shoes that he seized when a policeman threw his away. He was in Standard 9 (Grade 11) at the time. How ironic – his jersey from an NG Kerk bazaar and his first pair of shoes from a policeman.

Had he decided not to complete school one would have understood. Many of his friends dropped out because of difficulties. He simply did not give up! He was mostly number one in his class and enjoyed it, even to the point of arrogance. But, this came to a head when another boy surprisingly overtook him. His competitive drive took over and he restored the situation the very next term.

His response about his upbringing that describes his attitude most aptly is: "Look, I was very fortunate, very fortunate to have been born in a poor family". He believes that had he been born into a wealthy family he would not have learned the lessons he did. He would not have exerted himself the way he has; he would not have chosen the path he did.

He adds: "The collective of all those experiences have built the Hlengani that I am today."

Mathebula's life instilled within him a hunger for education, entrepreneurialism, ambition, resilience, hard work and many more attributes. He truly believes nothing is impossible if you set your mind on it.

After matric he really wanted to go to University and kept searching for a way, despite obstacles like lack of finances.

Fortunately, as often happens when we have passionate dreams, opportunities drifted his way. The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa was looking for young men to become Priests. It was on that ticket that he went to University.

Pointing his finger in the air while waving it from left to right, he said to me with absolute certainty: "My single point of reference was that it didn't matter how I was going to go to university. I was going to go to university!".

For him, failure was never an option. His first four months at university he lived on bread and cool aid, not sweet aid that at least had sugar in it. He slept on his first- ever bed. The funds he received were not enough for food. So, he collected empty cool drink bottles and exchanged these for money. With this he bought bread and cool aid.

But, politics happened... He got involved and was dismissed from the course. He boldly promised the academics that he would come back to complete his theology studies, which he eventually did. He completed his Honours degree in the field.

Where does this unconquerable drive come from? While some of it may have been inherent, he was raised by his unschooled, humble yet wise Grandmother who never stopped telling him that he would one day amount to greatness. If he came back from the bush with a droopy face because someone beat him in a fight she would analyse the altercation with him and show him that he can be the best. She inspired him to grow.

She also taught him: "The seeds of failure are sown at a height of victory or celebration". In other words, at that moment when one is recognized and elevated into a leadership position, what one says or promises at that beginning point could lead to one's downfall.

So, she taught him the best thing one can do when elevated is to keep quiet, listen, observe and then make an informed decision and comments.

Other great leaders also had a positive impact on his personal development. He sat at the feet of Beyers Naude after being dismissed by the church as a student. Naude explained that the same church dismissed him and that the manner in which Mathebula would handle the challenge would determine whether he would become something in this country.

When a militant Mathebula was the President of a Christian Student Body, Desmond Tutu sat him down and said: "Look young man, militarism is great, but the same things you burn you will have the responsibility to build". What a lesson!

In conclusion, the following story describes how Mathebula thinks and who he really is. During a recent Christmas break he invited an Afrikaner friend to his home village for a couple of days. The friend had to participate in every aspect of Mathebula's humble past – eat what they ate; eat like they ate (pap with fingers); do what they did. There were no 'holy cows'.

He wanted to strengthen their relationship beyond a 'superficial' one where black and white are only comfortable with one another in the comfort of their Sandton mansions.

He wants to build bridges. He wants an authentic country with authentic leaders, friends and colleagues; where we nurture relationships built on openness and acceptance of who we really are, which is part and parcel of where we come from and not being ashamed of it.

**TowerStone**

**Solution**

**Corner:**

Email TowerStone corner at [info@leadershipplatform.com](mailto:info@leadershipplatform.com) with any personal, team or organisational leadership challenges you face. The TowerStone team will try to answer these for you.

See [www.towerstone.co.za](http://www.towerstone.co.za)