

Mobilising the fitness troops in Lavender Hill



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Manie made a decision to transform the school after a visit by Mark Shuttleworth shortly after he returned from his first space trip. Shuttleworth, on a roadshow to schools, spoke of goals and dreams and visions. Manie's moment of epiphany came when the learners were asked to verbalise their dreams. He says, "it filled my heart with great sadness when a grade nine learner stood up and said, 'Sir my dream is to own a gun...'" Manie says it showed the mindset and the milieu these young people were growing up in and he decided right then that, "as manager of this school, I am going to be the instrument of change and transform the school and make a difference in the community."

He is a man of his word and he has taken giant leaps in improving the school and the opportunities for learners at Lavender Hill Senior.

A step in the right direction

Last week saw another step in Manie's dream come to fruition. A strategically equipped gym was opened at the school for its 1000 learners – an ambitious project called FUTURE CREW spearheaded by Virgin Active and strongly supported by the Department of Sport. FUTURE CREW is part of a Youth Development Strategy that aims to help transform communities, creating a talent pool of future staff and customers. It's a programme designed to involve learners in exercise, to help them learn skills and to be part of a mentoring programme headed by qualified sports and life skills coaches. Virgin Active aims to address three issues: increasing levels of obesity, highlighting sport as an integral part of a healthy upbringing and helping to combat the growing rate of unemployment amongst the South African youth. The gym is a culmination of two years of planning, research and training and an opportunity to invest in the

future of our country – the youth.

"The kids love the gym, says Manie. It is wonderful facility and the learners are clamoring to use it. We have had to introduce a roster basis and also utilise the gym during the PT component of our Life Orientation lessons. Everytime I think of the gym it puts a smile on my face..."

Talent search

At the opening of the new gym, Ross Faragher-Thomas, Managing Director of Virgin Active said, "We are privileged in our company to work with some special people but I have to say that Mr Manie stands out above the rest. A good educator is a measure of society and his passion and commitment to the community, the school and the learners is tangible." He told the group of learners they were lucky to have such a leader. "It's possible to come from a disadvantaged community and have a dream and we are going to work together to make the next champion sportsman, lawyer, doctor, engineer."

Theresa Kearly, National Transformation Manager for Virgin Active says it has been a dream and vision of hers to see the gym become a reality. "It's a step into a better future and we hope to see the pilot project in Lavender Hill extend into five other areas we have identified. These include Kwamfundo High in Khayelitsha, Leiden High I in Delft, Hout Bay High, Fairmount High in Grassy Park and the Sports' School in Kuils River."

Small beginnings

How did it all start? "Discussions began about two years ago with Donald Grant, Minister of Education, Western Cape and Ross Faragher –Thomas, MD of Virgin Active and Lavender Hill High School was earmarked for the pilot and the groundwork started," she explains. "As a school located in the centre of one of the most dysfunctional area of the Cape Flats, we decided to would focus our initial attention on them and approached Mass Opportunities for Development (MOD), an organisation with an existing infrastructure in the area."

MOD was born when Physical Education (PE) was phased out in schools and replaced with Life Orientation Skills (LO). Not only was there a marked increase in obesity amongst learners but there was no physical outlet for them after school. A learner off a sports' field can translate into a learner on the street very quickly. A need was identified for some kind of extra mural sport coaching at schools including basic stretching, fitness and nutrition. MOD is successful so we felt it would be of greater value to work with them than re-invent the wheel."

The way forward

Virgin Active has a three-pronged approach to the development of these sport centres: Supplying gym equipment, educating coaches and teachers and enabling the youth. This is not only focused on physical activity but includes a programme to identify and mentor a pool of learners who could have employment opportunities in the gym. Employability is a core focus.

Faragher –Thomas says, "We have the skills and staff to develop work readiness through developing life skills and discipline and to create leaders within the community. We have been able to do this project with the collaboration of the Department of Sport and Education as well as our partners, Chubb and Kauai and the support of iconic soccer player Ryan Botha who has given up his time to motivate the young learners at Lavender Hill. By engaging the learners in sport and activity, we believe we can develop and tap into the massive raw potential in the area."



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