

A community based project in Cape Town is rewriting the rulebook for sustainable social development and true empowerment – and changing lives in the process – by focussing on business before charity.

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A HAND UP, NOT A HANDOUT

ILIWA LAPHAKADE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

The nondescript grey house in the heart of the sprawling Cape Town settlement of Khayelitsha gives the lie to the township's reputation, and is known as a place of innovation, industry, opportunity and hope. It is only when one approaches and hears the happy buzz of voices and the hum of sewing machines drifting through the windows, that the true nature of the place becomes evident. This is the Iliwa Laphakade Women's Empowerment Project, and it is changing lives for the better, forever.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers moved to the Cape looking for jobs and opportunity. Numerous informal settlements sprang up around Cape Town to accommodate this influx, and the largest of these was Khayelitsha.

Today it is home to an estimated two million souls, and although facilities and living standards may have improved since the demise of apartheid, life remains tough for many inhabitants of this colossal township.

While Khayelitsha boasts a growing infrastructure, burgeoning tourism scene and some vibrant nightlife,



Eunice Mlotywa, right, Director of Iliwa, hands over a Christmas hamper to one of the senior citizens.

unemployment remains high and the prevalence of HIV/Aids adds to the social problems and challenges within the community. The sheer size and volume of the place, reputedly one of the largest single townships in South Africa (the other contender, Soweto, is actually a collection of 12 individual townships), means that facilities such as clinics, counselling centres, youth centres and old age homes are simply too overburdened to meet the needs of all residents effectively.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) too are stretched, with many having had their budgets severely slashed or losing their funding altogether with the advent of the global financial crisis. In the absence of delivery, social change needs to come from within. Fortunate, then, that there are people like Yoliswa "Eunice" Mlotywa in this world to inspire the rest of us.

The wife of a pastor, Eunice is a gracious, instantly likeable woman with a

love of music and a genuine passion for people and her community. She and her husband moved to Cape Town from the Eastern Cape in the mid 1980s, where she took a job as a domestic worker, and proceeded to raise their three sons in a modest house on the corner of Makhabeni Road in Khayelitsha's E Section. Being a pastor's wife, Eunice became a confidante and informal counsellor to many of the vulnerable and needy from within her community.

Touched by their plight and distressed that she was unable to offer much more than a sympathetic ear or a warm meal, a seed was planted in Eunice's mind that refused to die. She remembered her mother's response to her pleas for money as a young girl, pointing to a garment she had sewn and saying "There lies a cheque, cash it in." She began selling her mother's handsewn creations door to door, and an entrepreneurial spirit was sparked in her that burns to this day. ■■■

It was this spark that compelled her to approach schools in her area and offer to sew their school uniforms, initially doing all the work herself on an ancient Singer sewing machine. In 1996, she left her job as a domestic and took the plunge, opening Iliwa from home on a shoestring, a prayer and a little bit of funding from a local corporate that allowed her to purchase three sewing machines and some raw materials to get started.

The initial focus of the organisation was strongly socially driven – unemployed women from the surrounding community were trained in sewing and beadwork skills, and given work fulfilling the orders received from schools, clubs and churches in the area. Over time the offering expanded to include daily prayer meetings, counselling sessions for the youth and those affected with HIV/Aids, and a soup kitchen for the elderly and needy. Amazingly, the bulk of these activities were self-funded through the surplus profits made from sales of their textiles and beadwork, and this remains the case today.

Eventually, the project and its activities completely took over the Mlotywa house in Makhabeni Road. Eunice's husband relented and bought the family a second small home in the suburb of Brooklyn, near Cape Town, to live in, so that his wife could realise her dream of turning Iliwa into a fully-fledged social enterprise.

13 years later, the manufacturing arm of Iliwa boasts a team of six machinists, seven beading ladies, a supervisor, a director and a vibrant business supplying school uniforms, tracksuits, traditional garments and a range of beadwork, craft and decor items to an ever-expanding customer base. For Eunice, however, this is just the beginning. "I realised a while ago that we need to become more businesslike if we are ever to achieve all our goals for this project. We need to keep learning and moving forward, we can never stand still!" she says with her trademark smile.

Her plans include expanding their current space – she has her eye on the

vacant plot next door for a community centre – as well as increasing their impact through more formalised social and commercial activities within the community.

A longstanding relationship with Norwegian retailer and distributor Isandi recently saw Iliwa selected as one of only five participants countrywide in a NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation) funded business development programme.

Through this programme, and strategic partnerships with organisations such as SEDA (Small Enterprise Development Agency), the Old Mutual Legends Programme and the Cape Craft and Design Institute, the project received a business mentor and access to resources such as product development, marketing and brand development and production training.

Outcomes have included the creation of a brand new range of beautiful handcrafted items, and a market access facilitation that has seen Iliwa become the first ever Khayelitsha-based supplier to a national retail chain with over 750 stores countrywide.

Humble to a fault, Eunice is quick to acknowledge the support of benefactors and friends of Iliwa. "Our soup kitchen was assisted for several years by the Global Fund for Women, and we have received much support over the years from our friends in Norway and others. However, even though we are always so grateful for donations or funding, we realise that we need to be self-sustaining if we are to continue the work we are doing in the community in the long term."

When I visit Iliwa on a misty Wednesday morning, I am treated to the whole team singing a beautiful hymn in the easy, unaffected style inherent to so many of the Xhosa people. They start every day this way, giving thanks for this home away from home that has provided the citizens of Khayelitsha with a hand up, not a handout. 🐘



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