

Christel House graduates start school mentorship programme

A group of graduates from Christel House, a school serving Cape Town's poorest communities, have started a mentorship programme designed to ensure that matriculants at the school are given the greatest chance of success.



Xolisa Wulana and Zola Maphila have chosen to plough their time and energy back into helping others – who, like them, come from backgrounds of hardship and poverty – to get ahead. The two have set up a mentorship programme in their old school, Christel House in Ottery, that sees them and other graduates of the school taking one or two current matric pupils under their wing to help them through their final year at school.

“As graduates of this amazing school, we felt we needed to do something to contribute to the Christel House circle of life. This mentorship programme is our way of giving back,” said Wulana.

Wulana, who has a BCom from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and is being sponsored by Accenture to pursue his honours degree in information systems, recalls how when he walked through the gates of Christel House in 2002 as a shy seven-year-old boy, he didn’t realise that his life was about to change. “Coming from a township like Langa, where a child is more likely to do drugs and go to prison than to finish school, Christel House saved me and gave me the best possible education. Everything I am today is because of the strong values Christel House taught me,” Wulana says.

Reinvesting social capital

He and his fellow graduates now want to reinvest some of that social capital by providing advice and support to the current matrics in the school. Aside from one-on-one meetings with mentees, the group also arranges get-togethers with all mentors and mentees on a regular basis. And to help them brush up their mentoring skills, Christel House CEO Nicky Sheridan arranged for a life coach, Dale Williams, to spend a morning equipping them with the tools necessary to listen carefully and provide advice wisely.

“I meet with my mentees in a personal capacity twice a month, and in order to keep all communication channels open between us, I’ve made myself available to them on email and on social media platforms. I want to be accessible to them as much as possible,” says Wulana.

According to Maphila, who also began her Christel House journey in 2002 when the school was first established, it is becoming increasingly important for young people to form these mentor-mentee relationships, particularly those who live in townships like Langa, where they are forced to face down the relentless social demons of gangsterism, violence, prostitution and drug abuse.

“Of course Christel House puts an incredible amount of effort into making sure that the students are taught valuable life skills, in the hope that they use them to tackle some of these social challenges. In the meantime, the significance of this mentorship programme is that, because we all come from poor communities, most of us have had to conquer the same demons. That is our common ground, and that is why we’re able to build strong, valuable relationships with each other.”

Breaking the cycle of poverty

For Maphila, and many of Christel House’s alumni, the concept of ‘giving back’ truly hits home. “I was raised by a single father... My father struggled to keep our heads above water, and many times not having a clue what we were going to eat each day. Christel House gave me a chance. Despite us all coming from abject poverty, we now enjoy ‘a seat at the table of life’. And for that reason, I feel it is our duty to give back.”

Maphila also runs voluntary workshops to assist job-seekers from her community to become work-ready. “It’s a three-day workshop where we work through interview skills, CV templates, cover letters, netiquette – just to name a few. These are some of the things we take for granted, but I was surprised to discover that most of my trainees didn’t even have email addresses!”

Christel House aims to break the cycle of poverty by providing children with free, quality education in a stable environment. Children are not selected based on academic merit, but solely on financial need. The school maintains a rigorous academic programme, which is complemented by transport to and from school, nutritious meals, medical and psychological support as well as career guidance. According to Maphila, it is this holistic approach to education that sets the school apart, and ultimately sets a Christel House graduate apart.

Work-ready graduates

According to Nicky Sheridan, all this translates into ensuring that Christel House graduates are work-ready. They don’t just have the education, but also the life skills needed to ensure that they can become active economic citizens, who are gainfully employed. “We are proud of our outstanding academic success, but even prouder of the fact that 98% of all our graduates are in quality employment or still studying in university.”

Because of this focus on employability, the mentorship programme works closely with the existing College & Careers (C&C) department at Christel House, which is designed to assist students in making informed career and educational decisions. Amanda Nodada, who is also a graduate of the school and holds a BCom degree in information systems, now works as the C&C operator at the school, and is instrumental in making sure the Grade 12s have set activities for the year, including job shadowing at reputable companies like KPMG and Oracle SA, attending open days, taking an online career and personality test and preparing them for an intensive one-on-one interview with Sheridan.

“Nicky sits with each Grade 12 student for a 15-30 minute interview, asking them thorough questions ranging from who they stay with at home, what their current exam marks are, and what plan B is, should their first career choice not work out,” explains Nodada. “Having spent many years at senior level in a corporate environment, he is well-positioned to know exactly what prospective employers are looking for in a candidate.”

Support network

One of the objectives of the mentorship programme is that the current matric pupils will in turn become mentors to next year’s matrices, thereby creating a support network that will enrich all participants and continue to grow for many years to come.

“There is a general misconception that mentees are the only ones who actually benefit from a mentor-mentee relationship,” says Maphila. “But, I believe that being a mentor is just as important as having one. The skills that I have gained as a mentor, will carry with me into the workplace and throughout my life. It has been an incredibly enriching experience.”

Many studies now attest that volunteerism holds a number of key benefits for individuals, businesses and government. Apart from the economic gain, it also increases the volunteer’s overall wellbeing by boosting their confidence, reducing stress and teaching them new skills.

“We all have the power to be change agents; but only if we are willing to do our part. The beauty of it is, you don’t need to have money, you don’t need to have a degree, or anything like it. You just have to have heart and the willingness to give,” concludes Maphila.

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