

Humble Beginnings

On meeting Gladys Mkwanzazi (59), surrounded by children, the immediate impression gained is that of a shy, softly-spoken and humble grandmother. But looks are deceiving. Underneath that soft demeanor lies a strong woman with a fierce determination and will to build a future and leave a legacy for her family. From humble beginnings on a 2 hectare sugar cane plot, she is now the justifiably proud owner of a 77 hectare sugar cane farm and a burgeoning cane contracting business. This is her story.

In 1975, fate dealt Gladys a cruel hand when her husband passed away and she found herself left to raise nine children as a single parent. She courageously faced this challenge and was resolute in her determination to overcome what barriers there may be which would hinder her quest for growth and self-improvement. She decided to start farming on a 2 hectare plot—her short-term need to put food on the family's table and a long-term vision of expanding this 2 hectare plot to educate her children.

Surrounded by difficulty, Gladys quickly looked for opportunities – the first of which lay in production of vegetables. However, she did not intend to consume all her produce but took it to the market in Chatsworth and bartered her vegetables with other traders for second-hand clothing. The second-hand clothing was taken back to the rural areas where she sold it to the local community. She had identified that there was more money to be made from selling second-hand clothes as there was already enough people growing vegetables to supply the local demand.

Having managed to put enough money aside and still feed her family, Gladys was able to expand her 2 hectare plot to 11 hectares. And that is not all! She also purchased a tractor for R300 and two sheep! The trips to and from Chatsworth presented her second opportunity. "Whilst I was travelling into town I noticed a trailer in a white man's yard. I wanted that trailer as I had a tractor and I knew that if I had both then I would be able to do work for other sugar cane growers in the area. So I knocked on the door and asked the man if he would give me his trailer in return for my two sheep." Within no time the deal was struck and Gladys "could see her long-term vision now becoming a short-term reality."

Milestones

21 years after she first started farming on that 2 hectare plot, Gladys put down the deposit for the 66 hectare Klipspruit Farm : No 2 in the Umbumbulu region delivering to the Eston mill – bringing her total area under cane to 77 hectares which is estimated to cut 2 256 tons cane this season.

From that first tractor and trailer she now has a book value of approximately R700 000's worth of machinery and equipment and a burgeoning cane contracting business where she provides cane harvesting and short haul for 89 and 243 small-scale growers in the Umbumbulu and Umzinto regions respectively. In addition, 34 small-scale growers have requested her assistance with land preparation and planting.

Don't forget that all this time Gladys was raising and educating her nine children. Today, two have qualified in civil engineering, one in mechanical engineering and another in industrial engineering. She has a succession plan in place where her children will take over the farming operations. All the mechanical repairs and financial management are carried out by her children. Sizwe, her eldest son, looking endearingly at his mum and in-between taking non-stop phone calls from field staff on his mobile, says "I know there is no free ride here and I have to work hard to make sure that I do my best to make this family business prosper." The fact that he keeps meticulous records was evident by the

endless lists of grower names, fields to be cut and harvested and estimates for planting. The financial record keeping is carried out by Canefarms, a computerized bookkeeping and accounting service provided by CANEGROWERS.

But pride of place in Gladys's achievements lies in her new family home. Her face glows with pride as she shows me the small two-window, one-door, corrugated-iron roof dwelling where she raised her children to the new double story family home. The original home is now a store room attached to a workshop.

The Mkhwanazi success has also had a positive spin-off for the local community from where the 60 full time labour is sourced. When the harvesting season is closed the same people are used to assist with ratooning and weeding. A further 18 season workers are employed for three months of the year.

Gladys is also a source of inspiration to her community and unselfishly shares with others. She is a member of her local church and assists the bereaved families by providing groceries and transport and assists sick and infirmed with transport to hospitals when necessary. She also helps with water and regularly helps out with 2 000 litre water tank as well as giving food to the needy.

The story doesn't end here. Future plans include the formation of a youth co-operative which is in the process of being registered. Gladys believes that the youth should be uplifted and empowered so that they can continue wealth generation and job creation in the rural areas.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said "None of us will ever accomplish anything excellent or commanding except when he listens to this whisper which is heard by him alone." Gladys clearly heard her whisper.