

On the front line

WITH WARDA SALVESTER
warda.salvester@inl.co.za



OASIS OF HOPE IN GANGLANDS



NURTURING BRIGHT MINDS: Learners at the academy get a chance to reach their goals



PROUD: Lonwabo Nkonzo, 16, and director Ashra Norton

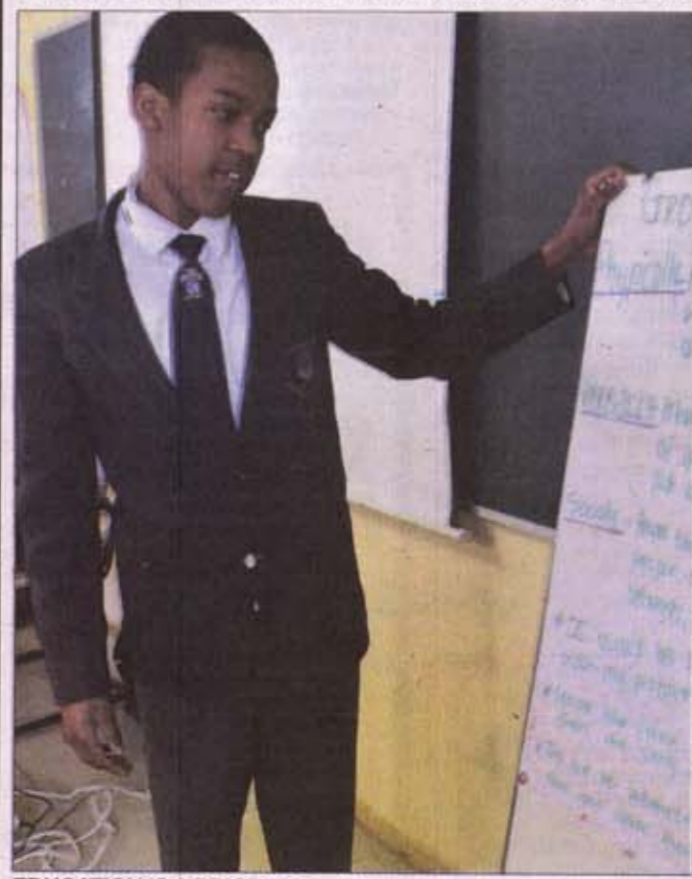
Watch out, JZ I want your job

ONE OF brightest stars at The Leadership College's (TLC) is Lonwabo Nkonzo. The Grade 10 boy was recruited from Heideveld Primary School, and has grown in leaps and bounds, says TLC director Ashra Norton. "Lonwabo's principal gave a very good motivation," Ashra adds. "He comes from a single-parent home, he has good leadership qualities, good character and is a real gentleman, and he is academically strong - he is fluent in Xhosa, English and Afrikaans." The 16-year old was the school's mid-year top achiever. Lonwabo also faces challenges at home in Tambo Village, Gugulethu, an area

rife with gangsterism, violence and drug abuse. He says TLC changed his life: "I've learnt from The Leadership College that life is not about looking at the negative things that's happening, it's about looking at the positive things. "I would like to do what TLC has done for me for others. I would like to open up a business which would help schools or places like The Leadership College in having a better place for children who would like to study further." The youngster has high aspirations for his future, and is aiming for a career in forensic toxicology. "Or I would like to study politics in order to become the future president of South Africa," he adds.



BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION: The college was opened in 2010



EDUCATION IS A PRIORITY: Pupils study hard at their schoolwork

IN THE heart of Manenberg gangland, lies a tranquil oasis called The Leadership College.

Unlike its violence-scarred surroundings, the small campus is peaceful and quiet, with a bubbling fish pond, fresh green lawn and a surprising lack of township graffiti.

The academy is the brainchild of Ashra Norton, who decided in 2010 to open a free, independent school for underprivileged gifted learners from the Cape Flats.

The school has 220 pupils and has become a shining beacon of hope in the gang-ravaged township.

Dubbed the "Superwoman" by grateful residents, Ashra - who was born and raised in Manenberg - says an overwhelming need to see young leaders from her community succeed is the driving force behind her project.

Stopped

As a young woman, a lack of money stopped her from studying pharmacy.

"[With no money] you could either do teaching or nursing, that was the only two professions the government would subsidise you for. I decided to give teaching a go," Ashra says.

"My first year at university I had to do an assignment on gangsterism and drugs.

"I interviewed some ganglords and realised that irrespective of



their situation, these guys were real leaders.

"They wanted great things in life, but there was no platform to nurture them in a positive way.

"As bad as gangsters are, they aspire to do good things in their communities. For example, they would buy food and electricity for people or a bicycle for a child's birthday.

"Many of these guys had no formal training, yet they are able to handle millions of rands. That is financial management - who taught them to do that?"

"They do HR [human resources], organisational planning [and] entrepreneurship.

"Everything is there, it's just not used in a good way.

Manenberg college gives kids a shot at reaching their dreams

"It haunted me. Something needed to happen for these leaders in the townships.

"A leader pulls the pack with him, so if you get a good leader, you get 5 000 good people behind him."

While working at private schools, Ashra sourced scholarships and started recruiting bright pupils from the area.

Challenges

But many of them couldn't pull through because of social challenges.

"Just getting to school was a problem," Ashra says.

"And these kids didn't have food to eat at home, but suddenly everyone around them wore name-brand clothing. They couldn't keep up.

"Then five years ago I thought, 'Why can't we have a

school that offers good quality education in the townships? Why can't it be accessible to our children, where they can just walk to school, instead of taking them out of the area?"

The college was initially met with some resistance, as residents felt it was "too exclusive".

However, as soon as people realised what Ashra was trying to achieve, they changed their attitude.

"Our people's mentality is that education is not really important," she says.

"If their kids can finish matric and get a nice clerical job somewhere, it is enough for them.

"People don't believe that you can become a pilot or a biokineticist or a doctor.

"Now when I ask parents what do you think your child should

become, without hesitation they will answer, 'A doctor.'"

Resident Gafiesha Ben was one of the sceptics when the school first opened.

She says: "People thought it was a scam.

"Where did you hear of a school like this in Manenberg?"

"My surprise was that the children get everything for free. Us coloureds mos don't get things like this.

Angry

"Now people get angry when their kids can't get in.

"My daughter is also at the school. She told me she wants to become an astronaut.

"I told her it's up to her to work hard and she'll get there."

At the college, learners receive everything for free - a school uniform, stationery,

school bag, tracksuits and a meal every single day.

The school is funded in part by State subsidy, which contributes 40 percent, and the rest is donations from small businesses and individuals.

Most of the time Ashra uses her own money to cover necessities and day-to-day running costs like electricity, toiletries and stationery.

And this lady puts her money where her mouth is. Her own son, who formerly attended a private school, is now also at the college.

"If this school is good enough for other children, it's good enough for my child," she says.

"We cannot build islands of excellence in the more affluent communities.

"We need to come out to these communities and see how we can empower our children."



AWARD: Ashra Norton, hero of the year winner

A HERO AT THE HELM

ASHRA Norton was recently named Lead SA's Hero of the Year in the Western Cape.

The dedicated director of The Leadership College was nominated for her sterling work in the gang-ravaged Manenberg area.

Lead SA is a national campaign encouraging people to make a difference in their communities.

Ashra's passion for learners' education, the importance of a quality education and the community's pride in the school inspired people who ultimately voted her a hero.

She says when she first received a call to tell her she had won, she thought someone was playing a prank on her.

"I was told to come into the radio station for an interview, and I thought it was done [after that]," Ashra explains.

"But after about a month I got a call to say I was nominated as a Lead SA Hero for the Western Cape. They gave me a nice certificate and again I thought it was finished.

"This was all kept away from me, although the teachers and students knew all about it.

"Then I received another call from the Lead SA office to say I was awarded Lead SA Hero of the Year Western Cape.

"That was a big surprise to me."

Ashra was awarded R50 000 for her project, which will go towards building four new classrooms at the school.

Anyone interested in assisting The Leadership College, can call Ashra on 082 786 5560 or the college on 021 637 4661.



EASILY ACCESSIBLE: The Leadership College in Manenberg offers free tuition and meals for learners daily



FUTURE LEADERS: Two of the 220 learners at the academy in the heart of gangland