



Young pharmacist going against all odds to transform rural healthcare

M Golozana

Nelson Mandela Academic Clinical Research Unit
(A division Wits Health Consortium, South Africa)

Corresponding author, email: Mawande.Golozana@witshealth.co.za

It is heart-warming to see healthcare professionals who are willing to go against all odds to transform their communities' healthcare services. Mandilakhe Mjekula is a loyal and dedicated pharmacist, living according to Ubuntu's principles. He dedicates his professional career to improving the health of his rural community. He is well-known in the Mhlontlo district area for his passion for pharmacy and willingness to go the extra mile for his people when he worked as a pharmacist at Dr Malizo Mpehle Memorial Hospital. Mandilakhe is now the owner of Mhlontlo Community Pharmacy.

Normally, our upbringing and environment play a huge role in what we become in the future and can act as the tool determining our destiny. Mandilakhe is a rural pharmacist who hails from the township of Mdantsane in East London, located in the Eastern Cape Province. He describes his childhood as challenging, due to the lack of role models, which shines a light on one of his major issues of concern – the lack of interest in education. At the young age of 15, Mandilakhe lost his parents and went to stay with his grandmother, who then became his legal guardian. He describes this experience as challenging for him, but he continued to follow his dreams, and wanted to use his childhood experience as a motivation to do better and encourage other youngsters in his community.

His passion for pharmacy was ignited by observing the dispensary staff in one of the pharmacies in Mdantsane when he was sent by his grandmother to fetch medicines. Mandilakhe describes this as an eye-opening moment for him and how the pharmacy bug got to him. He observed how the pharmacist, called "Bhut Mninawe", was professional and caring towards his patients, which motivated Mandilakhe to consider a career in pharmacy. Living in a township with prevalent social determinants of health, Mandilakhe knew that pharmacy was the best profession for him to follow and to use to transform his community's healthcare services. He was willing to follow in the footsteps of his mentor, "Bhut Mninawa", and worked hard in matric and achieved admission at Rhodes University in 2010 to do a pharmacy degree.

To a Mdantsane boy, that was a dream come true, and he was finally taking the first step towards his dream of becoming a pharmacist.

Scoring well in his first year, he was closer to his dream; and being at university motivated him to pursue his hobby of football further, his second love after pharmacy. When things started to fall into place, and he could see the bright future, he encountered a storm of countless setbacks in his second year. He injured his leg and had to spend weeks in the hospital, and this saw the end of his soccer extramural activities. He could only coach and provide support to his teammates. When he was writing his second year June exams, he lost his grandmother, which was a challenging experience for Mandilakhe as his grandmother played a huge contribution to his life after his parents' passing.

His grandmother's death during the middle of exams shook him entirely and he was left all alone to balance between the grief and his academic pressure. "I was writing Pharmaceutical Chemistry exams on a Friday, had to travel to Mdantsane to bury my grandmother on Saturday and come back to campus on Sunday to prepare for my Monday's Pharmaceutics exams," said Mandilakhe. This series of anxieties and stresses affected his academics, and he was ready to give up as he was excluded from Rhodes University for poor academic performance in 2011. He went back home and was not motivated to continue with his qualification but he was motivated by his siblings as they looked up to him to go back to school and continue with his studies. He returned to school and was given a chance to redeem himself. From that point, he never looked back, and finished his studies in 2014.

Upon completing his pharmacy qualification, Mandilakhe was offered an internship in one of the leading pharmaceutical companies (Aspen Pharmacare, Port Elizabeth) in South Africa. Although this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for him, Mandilakhe decided not to accept the job. His passion was more aligned with being at the forefront of serving the disadvantaged communities and transforming rural healthcare systems. He accepted a pharmacist intern post at Cecilia Makhiwane Hospital. This was a dream come true for Mandilakhe as he was now given an opportunity to give back and serve the people of his childhood community.

In 2016, he moved to Dr Malizo Mpehla Hospital to do his community service and in 2017, he took a permanent pharmacist



post in the same hospital. His dream was to make a difference and he believed that serving rural areas allows you to make a difference and touch many lives. This made him stay for four years as a pharmacist in a rural hospital that services disadvantaged communities. During his workdays at the hospital, he was exposed to the social ills in the community.



He dedicated his time to serve the community and desired for the effective transformation of the pharmacy. He aimed to give his patients the best level of care and made sure that they did not feel disadvantaged just because they are living in rural areas. While working there, he decided to go the extra mile in the development and service of Mhlontlo rural people, and he opened a community pharmacy that will serve the rural people of Tsolo. This was to make sure that the people of Tsolo get the best services despite being on the outskirts. Ultimately, Mandilakhe opened his pharmacy and now provides the best pharmaceutical services to the rural community of Tsolo.