

# Help us dream different dreams, Mr President

Former inmate says educating, empowering people is only way to keep them away from crime

Jermaine Craig

**S**IHLE Tshabalala won't be among those paying R3 million to sit at President Jacob Zuma's table at the ANC's 103rd birthday gala dinner tonight, but were he to have the president's ear he knows exactly what he would say to him.

"Development is a societal responsibility, not only a government one," Sihle, 32, would say. "We need systems and policies to give our people the power to dream different dreams to their current realities. If we do not empower our people with the ability to dream, our country still faces a dead end."

This message does not come from the Economic Freedom Fighters demanding he "pay back the money", or from the DA saying the ANC "just has to accept" the Western Cape is the country's best-run province. It's also not coming from the sort of person the president described this week as not even knowing "the struggles of the poor".

No, this heartfelt message is a genuine one, from someone who has a unique vantage point of this country.

Sihle's father died before he turned 1 and Sihle, bright and articulate, is the middle of five brothers single-handedly raised by his traditional healer mother Zandile.

Born and raised in Langa, he started school at 4 and finished matric at 16 from Khulani High, with "no aspirations to go to university".

Like so many of South Africa's youngsters, he needed to fend for his family at an early age, and like so many youngsters he turned to a life of crime.

"I applied for many jobs after finishing school, but there was nothing really that appealed to me. I was exposed to many negative things and people, and joined a gang specialising first in business robberies and then cash-in-transit heists. By the age of 18, I had a flashy car, an apartment in the city, expensive clothes and I lived the high life," said Sihle.

But that high life came crashing down in 2002, when he was arrested for a botched armed robbery at Sea Point's Arthur's Seat Hotel, and sentenced to 13 years in prison.

In prison he joined the 26 prison gang, selling parcels of dagga with a street value of R35 for R800 in prison.

While in prison, Sihle met a fellow Langa resident, Siphon Paul, who recruited him to the Group of Hope project to teach inmates maths and run recreational programmes.

Group of Hope was formed in 2002 by a group of prisoners at Brandvlei maximum security prison, who after attending an HIV/Aids prevention programme decided to "adopt" HIV/Aids orphans and people in need from the community.

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**WE NEED TO CHANGE... PEOPLE ARE NOT SITTING ON STREET CORNERS BECAUSE THEY HAVE NOTHING TO DO, BUT BECAUSE THEY LACK INSPIRATION'**

They started a food garden in prison to feed a local home, with the project branching into needlework, a cards and letters project for children who had never celebrated a birthday, and an arts and culture project.

Sihle says he fell in love with the calling to help others.

"We were surrounded and imprisoned by four walls, but those four walls cannot break us. Our physical bodies are incarcerated, but our revolution – our hearts and our minds – are not."

Facing long-term prison sentences, prisoners looked at what skills would remain relevant and useful to them when they were released from prison. They decided that finance and information technology were the only skills that would make them relevant, and employable, after their incarceration.

Sihle went online to teach himself how to become a computer programmer. In weeks he taught himself how to use the HTML, JavaScript, PHP and CSS systems.

"Globally, we don't have enough developers, and in prison, inmates have 23 hours a day to learn how to code, build websites, build mobile applications or blogs. When they're out of prison, they won't be judged on what they've done, but what they can build," said Sihle in an interview with the Cape Argus at Brothers for All's premises in Langa's Ward 53, off Bunga Avenue.

A few of the 31 students he is teaching computer programming and coding sit dotted around the office. On the shelves are empty packets of WeetBix, Rooibos, Joko and Five Roses tea and Shoprite newspaper advertisements which will soon be transformed into beautiful recycled bead jewellery, a project the proceeds of which feed 30 orphans in the Langa community.

Scribbled in chalk on the blackboard,



TURNAROUND: Sihle Tshabalala. Sihle says he fell in love with the calling to help others.

PICTURES: DAVID RITCHIE



ONE-ON-ONE: Cape Argus editor Jermaine Craig and Sihle Tshabalala.

there is a quote from Martin Luther King jr which reads: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?" It serves as Sihle and his team's motto and inspiration.

In a "revolutionary" step, Sihle has been granted permission to teach advanced computer programming to the inmates at Caledon's Helderstroom prison, a project he is hoping to roll out nationally. In the Western Cape, the Department of Social Development has agreed that Brothers for All will help develop a portal that will showcase employment opportunities and scholarship opportunities for the youth.

"We need to educate and empower our people. It's the only thing that will ensure our people don't enter a life of crime. In the year and nine months I've been out of prison, I've been quite observant. I came out of prison with a different perspective of how the world operates," says Sihle, who was named a Lead SA Hero of the Month last year.

"We can't change today's challenges with the same circumstances that created them. Twenty years down the line, we can't still be campaigning on the basis of offering people free houses, yet we sit with trillions of rands of unpaid municipal bills in our communities. By subsidising that backlog, the govern-

ment's pulling people backwards, rather than moving them forward. We need to change, improvise. People are not sitting on street corners because they have nothing to do, but because they lack inspiration.

"We work with people who have been at the deep end of life, who have come out of an exceptionally dark well, but who are striving to better themselves and their circumstances.

"If you want to see radical change, you have to offer opportunity. Driving change is when you make people aware that 'these are the challenges we are sitting with, but this is the alternative we are proposing.'"

Sihle has mixed feelings about social grants. "The social grant system has become quite corrupted. Everyone wants a cut of the big cake. People do not want to wait until they're 60 to access grants, people feel the government owes them and they want it now. Girls are willingly getting impregnated and putting themselves at risk, because they want grants. The government must make people dependent on themselves, not on the government, by introducing systems that inspire innovation, dignity and self worth. Grants do not.

"Perhaps they should take much of the budgets currently being spent on social grants and subsidise local businesses and entrepreneurs, saying we will match the profits you make per month with a social grant. Only then will government truly be following its principals of *vukuzenzele* (wake up and do it for yourself)."

## ANC must mutate, adapt, change or it will be left behind – Turok

Kieran Legg  
STAFF REPORTER  
kieran.legg@inl.co.za

BENTUROK has had a long-standing relationship with the ANC, starting in the mid-1950s when he first joined the Congress of Democrats, a future ally of the party. The former ANC MP retired from Parliament last year after the elections.

He tells a story of a political force that has achieved a lot, but is at the same time standing on the brink of the stronghold it has spent the last 103 years building, collapsing as corruption and inequality run rampant.

"You want me to tell you about (the ANC), I hope you have set aside 200 pages," he said over the phone. "It hasn't moved completely from a liberation movement to a political party. In many ways it still has characteristics of that movement. I mean, it is structured like one with its various branches... While it certainly functions as a political party in its modus operandi it does still have some of the features of a liberation movement.

"Has it achieved its objectives? The primary objective was political democracy and nobody can argue that we do not have a constitutional democracy. The idea of one person, one vote, majority rule – it has all been achieved.

"That said, we have the highest inequality in the world. This is really a total violation of the original objectives of the ANC. We never intended to build an unequal society. "We have serious problems. Even President Jacob Zuma has acknowledged we have problems, not only in the Youth League, these are very serious and it would take a helluva lot of time to explain why we have these problems.

"I'm not saying anything other people haven't said. There's corruption, buying



OUTSPOKEN: Professor Ben Turok says the ANC has not achieved its objectives

votes and abuse of positions."

Near the end of his political career Turok butted heads with his party. In 2011, the veteran MP faced disciplinary proceedings by the ANC after publicly explaining why he broke ranks and did not vote for the Protection of State Information Bill.

He suggested at the time that some of his colleagues may have voted blindly for the bill. Turok said the party had to change its ways, not necessarily for the good of South Africa, but for its own survival.

"The problem is that it's not changing." He said the "distortions" that had crept into the party would be its undoing.

"If history has taught us anything, no party is permanent. It must mutate, adapt, change or it will be left behind.

"What I would say is this, that we need to learn in South Africa that having the vote is not enough, and while the ANC has given the

vote to all the people on an equal basis, voting in itself does not lead to social change. The kind of changes that we need now will not come from the ballot box in any kind of mechanical fashion. They will come from the ground up.

"This is evident in the Economic Freedom Fighters' (quick rise to power), spontaneous local actions. Things such as the (poor protests) are all manifestations of this."

Have you achieved what you set out to do 60 years ago with the ANC?

"Well... we were all idealists, some were socialists, some were communists, many were committed democrats. We were willing to die for what we believed in, maybe we were utopian. We had strong hopes of creating a far better society, nobody can claim that we have not achieved some major changes. But, we have certainly not achieved what we wanted."

### THIS SATURDAY IN PERSONAL FINANCE



The start of a new year is a good time to reassess your finances, particularly if you receive a salary increase from January 1 or if you make financial resolutions for the coming year. It is also a good time to review your investments and consider your options for the year ahead if you are saving for retirement or living off retirement investments. This Saturday, PERSONAL FINANCE looks at how you can expect the main asset classes to perform in 2015.

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