

The meaning of matric when you're dirt poor

Published: May 24, 2008

A new film looks at how poverty-stricken kids see Grade 12 as the key to their dreams. Prega Govender reports

A few head of cattle graze among piles of rubbish, desperately scrounging for whatever scraps they can find.

In a nearby house in Nyanga, outside Cape Town, Siphon Mpaku pours scalding water over four dirty enamel dishes in the kitchen sink. One of his friends removes a green Tupperware container from the almost-empty fridge, hoping to find some leftovers.

As Mpaku begins to dry a dented aluminium pot with a dishcloth, his friends mockingly remark that he wants to be a "Model C" — a reference to wealthy black pupils who attend former Model C schools.

A look of fierce determination in his eyes, Mpaku retorts: "After my matric, if I don't go to tertiary, I don't want to stay for even six months here. I want a job."

Some years earlier he had dropped out of school after becoming involved in drugs. But against all odds, he returned to class to complete Grade 11, which he failed and then repeated.

In 2005 the streets of Nyanga reverberated with the 21-year-old's screams of joy after he passed his matric. It was a significant milestone, because he was the first in his family to achieve this.

This is a scene from a compelling documentary by filmmaker Molly Blank. It chronicles Mpaku's fears, hopes and dreams and those of his three friends, Mongamo Tyhala, Noluyanda Roxwana and Babalwa Yabo, as they prepare to sit for their matric exams at Oscar Mpetha High School.

In another riveting scene from *Testing Hope: Grade 12 in the New South Africa*, Mpaku alludes to his shameful past.

His parents had just divorced and he was barely 17 when he dropped out of school.

"I did a lot of bad things and got arrested. Each and every day, I was smoking. I would wake up at six and go to my friend's place because his father was selling drugs. When we had no money, we would rob people that were passing through."

Wearing his trademark brown suede hat, Mpaku says: "I did ask myself where this is going to lead me. The only thing it's going to lead me to is prison or death."



Surviving their dreams:

Mongamo Tyhala, with friends Noluyanda Roxwana and her baby Lonwabo, and Babalwa Yabo in front of Tyhala's shack this week. Picture: Ambrose Peters

“The friends strongly believed that matric was their passport to 'a really good life'”

“The irony is that it's not the future they thought they'd get by passing this test”

Try as he might, he could not escape his chequered past. His dream of sailing the oceans was abruptly snuffed out like a burning candle. Last May, just weeks before the documentary's release, his self-fulfilling prophecy came true when he was shot six times by gangsters in Nyanga.

After being on life support for a week, Mpaku died at Groote Schuur hospital.

Now his 19-year-old brother, Anele, is so determined to fulfil Mpaku's dream of joining the navy that he is repeating Grade 10 for the third consecutive year.

"I want to achieve my brother's dream because he was my role model," said the teenager, who blamed his poor academic results on his truancy from school.

Mpaku had taken care of him and his younger brother, Siyabulela, who is now in Grade 8, after their parents divorced.

This week, the documentary was screened by the Development Bank of Southern Africa's advisory unit and knowledge facilitation centre in Midrand. It has already been shown in several US cities, including Washington DC, New York and San Francisco.

Set against a backdrop of gangland violence in Nyanga, the pupils' dogged determination to pass matric has been so inspiring and touching that a teacher from a Hebrew school in the US donated about R15 000 towards their tertiary education.

Tyhala, Roxwana and Yabo — "born frees" who started school in 1994 at the dawn of the country's new democracy — spoke during the filming of the documentary at their crime-ridden school, of their intent to escape the trap of grinding poverty and hunger.

The trio and the late Mpaku strongly believed that matric was their passport to a better future — a "ticket to a really good life", according to Yabo.

Ironically, Mpaku's biggest fear was not dying in a hail of gunfire at the hands of gangsters. "In life, the thing I am afraid of is if I don't pass matric," he says in the film.

Tyhala echoes the views of thousands of other matriculants: "This year (2005) is the decider. Where you are going to be in the next 10 years, it all depends on this year."

Living in shack number 439, a pale green, three-roomed dwelling in an informal settlement known as Umkhonto in Nyanga East, Tyhala says in the documentary: "What scares me in life is failing not only Grade 12, but not making my brother and mother happy.

"The only reason I live is because of them — so I am scared of failing them."

But he also admits: "At times I feel there is no hope for us disadvantaged kids."

It is a poignant reminder of the country's education legacy : fee-paying, wealthy former Model C and private schools versus poor township schools.

Despite the government's good intentions in pumping billions of rands to improve school infrastructure and facilities, and the more than five million pupils who attend no-fee schools, commentators are adamant that most pupils are still not receiving quality education.

Recently the Sunday Times tracked down the film's trio to find out if they were any closer to achieving their dreams.

Tyhala had wanted to become a civil engineer, but failed to gain admission to the University of

Cape Town because his admission-points score was too low.

He is now studying for a degree in statistics at the University of the Western Cape.

"I am very proud of where I am, because I feel like I am doing something with my life. This is my dream. It's the beginning of the journey."

But he is still living in the shack with his mother, Baliswa, 39, his seven-year-old brother, Siyamthanda, who is in Grade 2, and a 16-year-old relative.

It's a life from which he desperately wants to escape.

"I want to get away from this. I don't want my brother to grow up the same way I did; I want it to be different."

Tyhala's mother also expressed the hope that they would one day move out of the settlement, which she described as a refugee camp.

"My only wish is that he won't buy an apartment and forget about us."

Tyhala hopes to qualify as a financial analyst once he completes his studies, which are financed by Woolworths.

"I want to build my mom a house and study further," he said.

The two girls also failed to achieve the goals they set in matric, but they are still trying hard to further their education.

Roxwana, who turns 21 next month, shelved her plans of becoming a lawyer and has instead opted for a bachelor's degree in political science at the UWC .

Last year, her studies were interrupted after she fell pregnant. Her son, Lonwabo, has just turned one.

"In a way I have achieved my dream, which was to attend university."

Her close friend, Yabo, 20, who had set her sights on doing medicine if she bagged top marks in matric, is now completing a diploma in mechanical engineering at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Like Mpaku, she was the first member of her family to pass matric with an exemption.

She and her parents still live in a four-room shack. The family has no piped water or electricity and still use the outdated bucket toilet.

"But I am still determined to help my sisters to get an education. We have come a long way since the making of the documentary," she says.

Tyhala, Roxwana and Yabo and thousands of other Grade 12 pupils believe that passing matric signals the start of a bright future.

But the sad reality is that only a small fraction qualifies to attend higher education institutions. Of these students, research has revealed that at least one out of every three will drop out before completing their studies.

Many others who don't opt for a tertiary education — mainly because of financial reasons — find themselves joining the grant queue because of the lack of jobs.

Film producer and director Blank said: "What's so ironic is that these kids believe passing matric is the key to the rest of their lives. But it's not the future they thought they would have by passing this test."

But Blank, who also worked as a substitute English teacher at Oscar Mpetha High for several months, said she was struck by the pupils' hopes, determination and sincere commitment to building their future and contributing to a better South Africa.

"I couldn't conceptualise their futures when I was making the film and it is really incredible to see where they are right now."

Overcome with emotion, she said Mpaku did not get the chance to watch the documentary.

"He told me that the film was the best thing that had ever happened to him in his life."