

## Meyer: The woman who helps troubled youngsters find their purpose

**W**hen society fears and rejects delinquent youngsters, Lucille Meyer takes them in and remodels them into upstanding citizens.

They arrive at the Chrysalis Academy in the Western Cape, where she is CEO, as school dropouts, gangsters, depressed, violent, on drugs and with a low self-esteem. But when they leave after three months at the academy, it is with determination and a new purpose in life – spurred on by their new mother.

Since 2011, Meyer has been revolutionising youth development, and through the academy's extensive programme, thousands of youngsters have passed through the doors of the academy, with a new outlook on their lives and their future.

"Youth mentorship, development and teaching come naturally to me," says the former youth activist. Growing up in the culturally diverse and vibrant District Six of the 1960s, Meyer began schooling in the Western Cape before moving to KwaZulu-Natal where she completed her matric at Beshet High School in Durban. She then studied Communications and Sociology through the University of South Africa before jet-setting off to the United Kingdom to get her Master's degree in Adult Education at the University of Manchester and later added an MBA degree to her name to top it off.

Her extensive years of studying, and being a youth and community activist in the early 1980s prepared her for the role she plays today. "As a child I would line up my toys and pretend to be teaching, I always had a passion for it, and clearly it was something that I was meant to do."

The academy, says Meyer, was founded by the provincial cabinet in 2000 and is currently funded by a collection of the Western Cape Government Departments including community safety; education; cultural affairs and sport to social development; transport and public works. The Academy which sits on the Porter estate in the suburb of Tokai, is a beacon of hope and offers youngsters the chance to turn their lives around.

### Sterling career in Public Service

Even though teaching was her passion, Meyer had to work her way up the ranks to get to where she is today. From



working at the Constitutional Assembly, to becoming a Chief Director, then Deputy Director-General in the private office of Former President Thabo Mbeki, Meyer says she has always been attracted to the Public Service.

After spending over a decade in Gauteng, she returned to her hometown and was approached by the Department of Social Development to share her experience and expertise in Adult Education at the Academy.

"What drew me was that I could play a vital role in changing lives." According to Meyer, many youngsters who enter the Chrysalis



Lucille Meyer and her Chrysalis Academy team inspire and mould young boys to unlock their potential and become responsible young men.

process are delinquents. Most of the learners are withdrawn, vulnerable, some have resorted to using drugs, and many come from abusive households.

Because of this, Meyer decided to change the programme to tackle aspects of behaviour and added therapeutic elements such as yoga and meditation, which act as outlets for anger. "It is exciting but hard work, and it enables young people to grow their resilience - that is what this academy is about. When youngsters leave our doors, they face severe challenges out there, so we try to equip them with the skills to cope and deal with those challenges."

### Putting youngsters on the straight and narrow path

One of the academy's aims is to tackle substance abuse and the gang culture that is rife in Cape Town's disadvantaged communities. Each year the academy hosts two all-boy and one all-girl empowerment training programmes which run for three months at a time. The programmes focus on the learners' physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development. To qualify, learners have to be aged between 17 and 25, have a minimum of a grade 9 pass, no criminal record, unemployed and not studying.

The programme is carried out in four stages: The Orientation Phase allows learners to adapt to the daily routine. Here they set goals for themselves and commit to learning. The Outdoor Phase exposes learners to the outdoors to test their strength, limits and weaknesses

while developing leadership and teamwork skills. The Skills Phase places learners in the classroom with a range of different subjects from sports coaching and woodwork to hairdressing and cookery. Finally, the Community Phase is where learners are prepared for the real world outside Chrysalis and equipped with career guidance and life orientation skills.

Since the programme began 13 years ago, approximately 6 000 learners have emerged from Chrysalis empowered to face life's challenges. This is why the academy has become one of the most successful youth development organisations in South Africa, with applications from hundreds of thousands of learners each year.

"The harsh reality is that we have so many youths who have lost their way. Approximately 80% of our youth are not in education, employment or training. If they are not involved in any of these, what are they doing? The answer is simple, nothing at home, so they are drawn into the temptation of drugs and crime. These are our future leaders, so we have to put in the work to build a sustainable country."

This is what Chrysalis aims to tackle, while contributing to nation building, adds Meyer. With youth of different races and backgrounds, the academy instills a sense of unity, by raising the South African flag and singing the national anthem each and every morning.

"We are trying to build, uplift and instill values to enable the learners to transform their lives," says Meyer.

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**Model learners**

Two such learners who have totally transformed their lives are Patrick Stungwa from Mitchells Plain and Zama Thasana from Philippe East. Both aged 26, they are now interns at the Chrysalis Academy and have become ambassadors for change in their respective communities. After completing the programme in March this year, Stungwa says Chrysalis has truly changed his outlook on life. "Before I came to Chrysalis I used to just do things without thinking, with my actions often getting me into trouble, but now I take time to process decisions and make the right choices in life."

With a keen interest in office administration, Stungwa was awarded the academy's internship and now works at the admin office on the premises. "Chrysalis has given me the tools to dream and achieve something with my life," he says.

Bubbly and confident Thasana, who completed the programme last year, says she was a short-tempered angry teenager who now has learnt the art of self-control, thanks to Chrysalis. "At first I was scared when I started at the academy. I did not know anyone and I was troubled. Today I have lifelong friends that I met at Chrysalis and have found a purpose in my life. Who knows where I would be without this programme?"

Thusana excelled in fire-fighting and says the skills she learnt helped her save lives in her township. "In the township where I live, many people use candles for light and shacks burn down almost every week. What I learnt at Chrysalis saved my life." She now advocates fire safety and prevention in her community.



*Chrysalis Academy graduates Patrick Stungwa from Mitchells Plain and Zama Thasana from Philippe East in the Western Cape have totally transformed their lives since completing the programme. The two are currently completing an internship at the academy and encourage and motivate other youngsters to do the same.*

Due to the programme's success, other provincial departments, like KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng have also approached Chrysalis to train and teach staff to begin the same programme in their respective provinces. Eleven youth facilitators have since graduated and are now ready to roll out the first programme in KwaZulu-Natal. Meyer says she'll introduce the programme in Gauteng by next year.

In addition to the three-month programme, the academy offers a five-year support programme and also assists learners find employment. "We do everything with love and compassion, and this lets learners know they are valued, and they matter in society."

Change starts with each and every individual, says Meyer. "As South Africans, and as public servants, we need to look at ourselves and reflect on how we relate to other people. Do we look and treat others as fellow South Africans? Change starts there. If I can relate to others in a way that I would like them to relate to me, we are halfway there, towards creating a better society for tomorrow." ©

