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Student's start-up prioritises sneakers, soap and art



Anele Siyotula

Photo: Supplied

University of Cape Town (UCT) student Anele Siyotula is a maths whizz and creative genius, and he draws on these and other skills for his start-up, 1Stop Tekkie Wash. His love for colour means that he breathes life into students' old sneakers with art; and because he's a numbers man, no one crooks his books.

Siyotula established 1Stop Tekkie Wash in 2018 from his residence room at Leo Marquard Hall. Back then, he provided only a single service – sneaker cleaning – and the business was thriving. UCT students supported his venture, and the entrepreneurial bug bit him hard.

"No one likes a pair of dirty takkies. Many fellow UCT students were supporting us, and we were doing so well. I was on top of the world, and told myself many times that this is for me," he said.

Instead of becoming complacent, Siyotula said, he realised that sneaker cleaning on its own would not always be enough to sustain the business. He began to look for inspiration on how best to grow his brainchild, and he found it.

Sneaker art

The mathematics honours student said that while channel hopping in front of the TV one afternoon, knee-deep in his undergraduate course material, he watched a show featuring a Johannesburg sneaker artist. The programme explored the artist's business model and her journey to date. Siyotula was inspired. He had the clientele and the tools, and he remembers thinking that sneaker art would be a welcome addition to his business model. He was sure his clients would love it.

"It sparked something in me. I thought about it, and did some research. As far as I knew, the concept wasn't offered in Cape Town, and I jumped at the opportunity to add it to my service," he said.

Two years down the line, and 1Stop Tekkie Wash has successfully retained the sneaker art concept. Today, the business operates from premises in Mowbray. "We try to make it as simple as possible for clients, and everyone likes the collect and deliver option. It just means that you don't have to worry about dropping the sneakers yourself. We already have so much to worry about, don't we!" said Siyotula.

Innovating during a pandemic

Siyotula said the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced his business philosophy – don't put all your eggs in one basket. It challenged him to think outside the box to keep his business afloat; and part of changing things up included bringing Onke Yeye, his business partner, on board. "I'd like to think that we've always tried to improve our business; sneaker art is one such example. Suddenly, when COVID-19 hit, we needed to do that more than ever to survive," he said.

Even marketing was tough. Before the pandemic, Siyotula and the team would take to the streets of Mowbray and Rondebosch to speak to students. They would ask about their likes and dislikes, get a sense of what was trending, and explore ways of incorporating those trends into their business model. But when the university closed its physical campuses in March 2020, and students returned home, that exercise was dead in the water.

In response, the team focused their attention on online marketing. Updating their social media channels was their primary goal, and Siyotula said this presented a means to connect with new and existing clients. The business made giant strides in 2020, adding clothing dyeing to its service offering.

"That's what makes us unique. We're constantly looking for ways to innovate and shake up our business. We're also not afraid to try. Young aspiring entrepreneurs out there, don't be afraid to try," he said.

Power of entrepreneurship

With South Africa's youth unemployment rate at alarming levels, Siyotula said, he believes that entrepreneurship is one potential solution to end joblessness. He encouraged more youth to join him on an entrepreneurial journey.

“As entrepreneurs, we can help to solve one of the biggest problems in this country by simply creating employment – one job at a time. It’s one way of breaking the cycle and helping people out of poverty,” he said.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News

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