

I hope that teen moms realize that their path to success still exists, and the only way to achieve it is to make the decision to go after it

AUCIA T. BOWENS
US Author

CHANGING LIVES

Schoolboy digs graves for fees, helps feed 120 children a week

GENEVEVE SERRA
geneveve.serra@iol.co.za

WHILE other children were enjoying their holidays at the beach, this teenager was digging graves to help pay for his schooling and to support his family.

Gustav Appels, 19, from George, is a Grade 12 pupil at Parkdene High School.

During the extended school holidays, Appels began working at the Burial Assistance Service, where he had to dig graves to pay his R300 monthly school fees.

When the new school year began, Appels continued to work at the graveyard, as he is the sole breadwinner of his family. He lives with his grandmother, Anne Jacobs, 65, his mother, Croné Appels, 36, and two siblings.

Appels was raised by his grandmother, who took the responsibility of caring for the children after his father died and his mother was not able to take care of her family.

"At the age of 3, my sister and I moved to my grandmother's home because our mother was not that active in our lives," said Appels.

"My father died when I was just a little boy. My grandmother basically raised us since we were babies and she used to be the breadwinner.

"She is now a pensioner. I am now the breadwinner of the family. I work at the graveyard on weekends and during the school holidays.

"The money I managed to earn during the school holidays paid for my



GUSTAV Appels, 19, with his grandmother, Anne Jacobs. I SUPPLIED

school uniform and we were provided with stationery.

"I still have to pay for my school jacket, which is nearly R800," he said. Appels enjoys the work and does not mind the hard labour. But what weighs heavily on him is the tragedy of burying so many people during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"It was a very sad time for families and for us, workers, to see their pain and loss," he explained. "We had to dig a lot of graves when people died of Covid-19. It was hard for families who could not be with their loved ones at the final stages of their lives," he said.



GUSTAV Appels, 19, works at the graveyard in George to help pay for his school fees. I SUPPLIED

Appels also began a soup kitchen, named Bread of Life, with the help of his grandmother when he saw how many children were going hungry. The family relies on donations to keep the kitchen going. Together they manage to feed about 120 children per week.

Jacobs donates part of her pension money towards the soup kitchen. "I love to support Gustav with the soup kitchen and I am very proud of him."

The family also receives donations from a fund created for Bread of Life, which is managed by Gregory Noble, who is also a local musician in the region.

"Gustav is an inspiration to everyone here," explained Noble.

"Despite his circumstances, he wants to make other people's lives better."

"He brings so much love and light

to the children here.

"I met him when he joined our local drama group," Noble said.

Appels hopes to continue to inspire the children in his community once he completes his schooling: "I want to uplift them, I want to show them you can do anything, despite your circumstances."

"I want to make a change in this community," he said.

NATURE

Women scale great heights in conservation

NATHAN ADAMS
nathan.adams@iol.co.za

OWNING and operating a business that is focused on nature conservation is no walk in the park. For Thandeka Mayiji-Rafu it means climbing steep mountains.

Born and raised in Joburg, but with her family roots in Willowvale in the Eastern Cape, Mayiji-Rafu owns Likhonaletu Projects and works with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) a global environmental group based in the US.

Mayiji-Rafu leads teams of mostly women who clear alien vegetation in the Western Cape. With experience working as a contractor for SA National Parks (SANParks), CapeNature and the City of Cape Town, Mayiji-Rafu said it hadn't been a straight forward path to conservation management for her.

"I started out working in a hotel and then studied social work via Unisa, but never completed because of finan-

cial issues. As time went on I started looking for other things to do and I was introduced to SANParks at Table Mountain. They were looking for contractors so I started working with them as a contractor doing alien vegetation clearing. This was in 2010."

Almost 10 years later, when TNC was looking for contractors, Mayiji-Rafu made sure she threw her hat into the ring and she was successful. "I started working with them for the flat areas and then they introduced the paths of working up in the mountains, so I took the chance and said 'yes'. They introduced it and asked who was interested."

While International Women's Day is observed tomorrow, Mayiji-Rafu continues to scale mountain slopes and abseils the rugged terrain to get the job of clearing the alien vegetation done.

She said at the moment they were working outside of Cape Town.

"I have two teams. We are working outside Villiersdorp and Franschhoek by the Theewaterskloof Dam. Last week we had to rescue our people out of the area because of the fire, so you must be ready at any time to rescue your team."

"We are clearing alien vegetation, mostly pine and also black wattle. It's not an easy job. You have to use the ropes and make sure it is anchored correctly. Someone has to double check before you go down and the areas are quite steep so it needs a lot of concentration to do this job."

The risks and rewards are great in equal measure and Mayiji-Rafu said it was all about having the right people for the job.

"At the moment it is quite difficult because, for starters, you have to make sure that when you select people who are going to work there they have to be physically and mentally fit and they understand the risk that they can



THANDEKA Mayiji-Rafu is a tenacious business woman and conservationist. I SUPPLIED

be exposed to. They must also not be afraid of heights."

This is not a job to be taken on lightly but she said women were equal to the task. "Women can conquer anything. I have been working in this industry for quite some time and when things are tough the men run away; then you will remain with



LUZUKO Madalambane, 31, is a rope technician on the Likhonaletu Projects. I SUPPLIED

the women."

"We are making a difference; when we clear those areas, we are helping out with water scarcity in Cape Town because those plants are taking a lot of water from the ground and we clear the area so the water can run down to the streams."

ENTERPRISE

Artist with the boldness to excel

AMBER COURT

CAPE TOWN-born, Los Angeles-based entrepreneur, creative and artist SASKIA Thana Clements is on a path to success as she builds her brand over the past six years in the US.

The 24-year-old, who is a quadruple threat in music, acting, dancing and writing, is working on her debut EP set for release later this year.

Clements moved to Los Angeles (LA) in 2014 and was awarded a scholarship to study film in the US before turning her attention to her business and music careers.

Spotted by a scout when she was 14, she participated in pageants such as Miss Teen South Africa 2011 and Miss Teen YOU 2012.

As a young girl, she always dreamed of living in California and pursuing a career in entertainment and business.

"It took a lot of adjusting, but I

needed to adapt to a new pace and culture. I love living out here, because for me being in a competitive environment with a lot of opportunity is extremely motivating," she said.

The young entrepreneur flourished further with her LA-based creative agency The Boldest, which manages and markets brands.

"I started a marketing company in 2018 and, this year, I decided to re-brand my business model around my passion for producing and directing, which is 'The Boldest'," she said.

"I truly believe that brands, artists and athletes have a leadership role in society and should be using their platforms to be authentic and leave a lasting impact in the lives of others," she added.

Clements manages a team of creatives committed to the creation of innovative brands, products, music and films that align with this vision.

Her team also has The Boldest Journal, an online blog.

"These topics are all geared towards helping people become their best selves and step into their roles as leaders," she said.

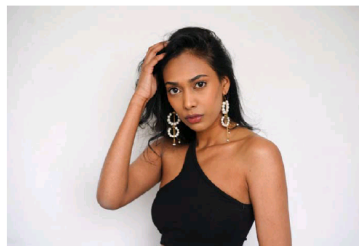
Being a young entrepreneur in LA is both exciting and incredibly overwhelming for the young visionary.

"You have to crawl, then walk, and before you know it, you'll be running. Sometimes I have to remind myself of my progress and that I fought through a season of crawling."

She co-founded a health and wellness website named Afrilwellness, alongside two successful South African businesswomen, Viola Manuel and her mother Deidre Clements, in 2018.

The business aimed to provide simple ways to live a well-balanced and healthy lifestyle using products sourced from Africa, such as rooibos.

"My EP is a story of overcoming



SASKIA Thana Clements, 24, a Cape Town-born entrepreneur, creative and artist, is making waves with her production agency The Boldest in Los Angeles. She will be releasing a new EP later this year. I SUPPLIED

obstacles as a woman. It highlights the journey of becoming well-seasoned and finding a sense of strength through the challenges," she explained.

"I would love for my EP to appeal

to those that enjoy electronic music while exploring the beauty of jazz. My visual EP will be the first major project released under my agency," said Clements.



ZAHEERA Soomar

Soomar is a top achiever in a formerly male sector

STAFF REPORTER

ZAHEERA Soomar has always stood out. In the male-dominated world of mining, oil and gas, and consulting, where women (and especially women of colour wearing a hijab) are not common, she has been continually motivated to achieve great things.

Not yet 40 and with three children, she has several academic qualifications and published articles under her belt, she's worked in more than 25 different countries – some in executive positions – and has launched her own consultancy firm. She is the global head of education for socio-economic development at Anglo American, overseeing projects in 10 countries.

"You can have it all, but it does not mean you have to do it all," says Soomar when asked how she manages everything. She has four pointers for other women:

Define what success is to you

Soomar believes that every woman should decide for herself what success means to her. This means setting goals for yourself and not allowing yourself to be measured according to other people's expectations. "Don't shy away from asking for help or letting others do the non-essential tasks like cooking and cleaning," she advised.

As the main breadwinner in her family, she is well aware of the guilt that many women feel when they have to assign some of their responsibilities to other people. This is why she consciously makes time for her children every day.

Be clear on what you want to achieve professionally

Soomar credits her time as an MBA student at the UCT GSB with giving direction to her career. It was during this time that she realised that she did not only want to be good at her job but wanted to make more of a positive impact.

This led her to look for roles with more social development and sustainability emphasis, giving her deeper professional satisfaction as well.

The programme also helped her to grow personally as well as to develop a network of contacts she depends upon to this day.

"When I began the MBA, I was at the start of my leadership journey, figuring out what it means to be a female leader, a woman of colour in a very male dominated environment."

Be an authentic leader and encourage other women to rise

Like many working women, Soomar has stories of being mistaken for a tea lady, having to endure verbal and sometimes more overt acts of discrimination and sexual harassment. But she has not allowed anyone to push her around or make her sit at the back of the boardroom.

"I speak my truth and I will call them out. This is why I am personally committed to helping women thrive in the workplace and in their careers. Despite the number of things going on in my life, I dedicate a portion of it to mentoring women, helping them develop skills and assisting them to overcome challenges and ultimately reach their goals."

Find your balance

Soomar is a devout Muslim, devoting time every day to prayer, reflection and reading the Qur'an. The reflection and meditation part of her religious practice influences her values and ethical approach to life as well, giving her busy life balance and meaning.