

Born-frees seize opportunities with zeal

LAUREN O'CONNOR-MAY

Nowadays young people have the kinds of opportunities that the youth who took part in the 1976 Soweto uprising could have only dreamt of.

On June 16, 1976, thousands of high school pupils rose up against 'Bantu' education which doomed them to a life of servitude.

The peaceful march by schoolchildren against the apartheid state's move to impose Afrikaans as the medium of instruction was meant to culminate in a rally at Orlando Stadium in Soweto, but on their way they were met by heavily armed police who fired tear-gas and later live ammunition. Two pupils, Hastings Ndlovu and Hector Pieterse, were among the first to be cut down by police bullets.

Forty years on and the magnitude of just how a high a price was paid for freedom is not lost on today's youth who are seizing hard-won opportunities with both hands, or, as in the case of Unathi Simayile, with both feet.

Unathi, 15, a Grade 10 pupil, from Crossroads, is part of the national under-15 women's soccer team. Her peer, Phalo Mathungana, is a self-confessed opportunity grabber. The Grade 11 pupil, from Mandalay, Mitchell's Plain, will be taking part in the Lebone Leadership Conference at Lebone College in North West, in July. The conference is hosted by the King of the Royal Bafokeng in Rustenburg.

Phalo first heard about the conference from his principal Greg van Schalkwyk.

"He told me: 'This is a wonderful opportunity for you.'"

So Phalo lost no time in applying to take part.

"That is a habit I have, I jump at everything," he said.

Phalo feels that today's youth not only face academic chal-



lenges but also social ones.

He says, pupils are under a lot of pressure to succeed but there are limited spaces available at university.

"There is a lot of competition in South Africa for a place at university."

Unathi and Phalo both attend the Cape Academy of Maths, Science and Technology in Constantia, which is another opportunity that would have been denied to them 40 years ago. The FET-styled school was opened in 2004 for pupils, especially those from disadvantaged communities, with good ability in maths, science and technology.

The school and its pupils have had numerous successes, such as taking its first significant step towards becoming textbook-free with a donation of 20 Chromebooks in April and launching several junior pilots into the air through its two-year aviation programme run by the South African Air Force. As part of the programme, pupils train on simulators that prepare them for solo flying.

Mr Van Schalkwyk said three of the school's former pupils are "in the air" with a Private Pilot Licence (PPL).

"One is doing further training to get his commercial license," he said.

Mr Van Schalkwyk was at university in 1976 and well remembers the many challenges that the lack of opportunities caused his generation.

"At that time, you could only study at uni-



versities that were earmarked for people of colour," he said. "If the degree you wanted to study for was not available at UWC, then you had to get a special permit allowing you to study at UCT."

In some fields, such as science, it had been exceptionally hard for students of colour to get access.

"Some of my peers were told that there is no need for black researchers," Mr Van Schalkwyk said.

While educational opportunities have changed, many challenges still remain, Mr Van Schalkwyk said.

"Our background has been built up and it is a challenge getting our learners ready for jobs that don't exist at this stage. South Africa has been welcomed back into global trade and global education and the challenge for schools is to prepare kids to become global citizens."



■ Above: Unathi Simayile has been selected for the under-15 national girls' soccer team.

■ Above left: Phalo Mathungana will take part in the Lebone Leadership Conference at Lebone College in North West Province in July.

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