



RAYMOND ACKERMAN
ACADEMY OF ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

Melilizwe Gqobo

CLASS OF JANUARY 2012

Story told by
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& Carol Williams



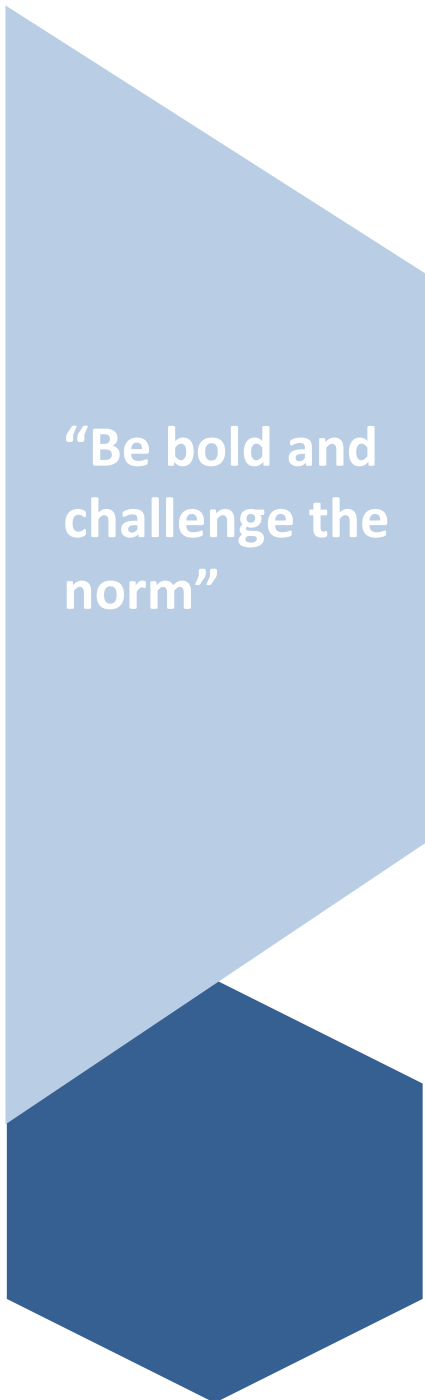
AN ENTREPRENEUR WHO PAYS IT FORWARD

Melilizwe (aka Meli) is an energetic guy with a winning smile. He was born in Soweto, Johannesburg and lived in the Eastern Cape before moving to Cape Town in 1997. His parents separated at a young age and so he never knew his father. Through thick and thin his family have stuck together and by the sounds of it his mom is an incredible lady who has had a profound impact on his life. Meli is a proud RAA alumnus from the class of January 2012. I met with him at The Hubspace, a shared office space in Khayalitsha that he co-founded and is a partner at. Meli had this to say.

ONE OF MY MAIN CHALLENGES GROWING UP WAS a lack of access to resources. I would have loved to have been a boy scout or played chess but there were no opportunities for this growing up. I went to a mixed school and so I was always perceived to be different by my friends in the township and that was sometimes really difficult...living in a township with all the challenges that came with that but going to a mixed school in a better area and being exposed to a bigger world was a tough thing to navigate as a youngster. The upside of being exposed to such a diverse world is that I am comfortable in a range of social contexts; I can sit comfortably with the poorest of the poor and I am just as comfortable having a conversation with top leaders in the business and academic world.

A DEFINING MOMENT IN MY LIFE WAS in grade 10. I got in to some trouble at the end of grade 9 and I made a decision that it was time to be more constructive with my time. I spent most of my leisure time away from Dunoon and this was helpful in staying away from all the negative influences that impact young people in that community.

I STARTED SELLING THINGS AT A YOUNG AGE. My first profitable business was selling push pops at school when the tuck-shop stopped selling them because the teachers complained about the noise they made in class. I saw the gap and took it.



“Be bold and challenge the norm”

I HEARD ABOUT RAA THROUGH A FRIEND OF MINE and decided to apply. The first lesson I learnt there was from Elli (the director). She always emphasized the importance of your personal and professional reputation. Being at the RAA was a life changing and life shaping experience. Meeting up with like-minded and energetic people in an inspiring environment was wonderful. RAA is not a hand out and there are certain expectations and responsibilities that come with being chosen as a student of the RAA which is a good thing! Another thing that attracted me to the academy is the fact that it is a 6 month course, so it's not too long.

MY BUSINESS IS The Hubspace in Khayelitsha, of which I am co-founder and partner. The Hubspace is a shared office space based in Khayelitsha and provides the much needed resources for local entrepreneurs in Khayelitsha. We opened our doors about 5 months ago and currently host 20 members. About 14 of these are small business owners and the rest are NPOs. Currently all of our members are sponsored and there are different packages available, ranging from 3 to 12 months. We held a competition to choose our first members and received 60 applications for the competition. From this we narrowed it down to 28 finalists and chose our 20 from there.

We have different businesses using The Hubspace including fashion, healthcare, media, food and The Department of Coffee. Our vision is to start 10 Hubspaces around the country in the next 3 years, with our Hubspace in Kayamandi, Stellenbosch set to open its doors in the next few months. South Africa has a lot of money to invest in entrepreneurs; one just has to knock on the right doors. Our hope is that we will serve as a safety net for young entrepreneurs who need continued support once finishing at the RAA or for entrepreneurs who are just starting out.

SOME OF THE CHALLENGES WE HAVE FACED so far have been managing relations with stakeholders and finding female entrepreneurs. We are looking at how we can get more female entrepreneurs to use the space, often they are less confident and we need to find ways of getting them involved. Our business model is service based and we are hoping to eventually have some members who are sponsored and some members who can pay their membership fees. The Hubspace is not going to make lots of profit but it is able to sustain itself and the service that it provides to entrepreneurs and the community at large is of course where its value lies.

MY MESSAGE TO YOUNG PEOPLE IS to be bold and challenge the norm. Failure can be good for you, so don't be scared of it. Recognise your opportunities and mistakes and sometimes you just need to shut-up and listen!