

PUTTING Worms TO WORK

While growing up in a small Eastern Cape village, Phumlani Dlongwana had big plans for his future. In fact, he wanted to become the president.

About 30 years later, he may not be sitting in parliament but he's contributing to society from behind the scenes, helping to reduce our carbon footprint and providing jobs at the same time.

The key to his success: the humble earthworm. Using a device called an earthworm hammock – consisting of trays at different levels – Dlongwana and his industrious worms turn waste into compost for sale. His business, Waste To Food, currently employs three people, but there are plans to create more such enterprises, with a target of 30 micro-franchises.

“By turning waste into compost, we are saving the planet [one] bag at a time,” he explains. “We receive food waste, manually chop the items into smaller pieces, manage the earthworm hammocks, harvest the compost, dry [it], sieve it (to ensure no small rocks and twigs are included) and then bag it.”

Around two million tons of food waste are disposed of at Cape Town's landfill sites each year. Not only does every ton of waste generate two tons of carbon dioxide – which contributes to climate change – but the toxins can also leach into the soil and contaminate groundwater. This is why enterprises like Dlongwana's are so vital.

The 35-year-old father of four has always had a passion for helping people.

Entrepreneur Phumlani Dlongwana harnesses the natural activity of earthworms to produce compost and create jobs. **Eugene Yiga** digs deeper.



Phumlani Dlongwana uses a device called an earthworm hammock to convert food waste into compost.

After school, he wanted to study social work but his family couldn't afford the university fees.

He spent several years recycling bicycles for an empowerment project designed to help people start their own businesses. He also worked as a bicycle mechanic, started a cycling club and helped cyclists with wheel alignments during large races.

But the wheels of fortune turned in his favour when he went to work for Full Cycle, a leading resource for earthworms and worm farming in South Africa. It was there that he found his calling and gained the knowledge to start Waste to Food.

When the business was founded in 2013, it was difficult to find start-up funding to build the worm hammocks, and to find a piece of land large enough to rent at an affordable price. It took him two years to secure donors and a lease at Philippi Fresh Produce Market.

Another challenge was Dlongwana's lack of business skills. Fortunately, he was able to overcome this by studying through

the Small Business Academy Programme, an intensive nine-month course offered by the University of Stellenbosch Business School.

“It was a dream come true to be able to study,” he says. “I learnt so much in terms of planning ahead, writing a business plan, and how to approach funders. I also realised that you need to know every detail of your business – your market, your competitors and your end user – or else you will not realise the potential, the areas of improvement or the opportunities.”

In late 2015, Dlongwana and 20 other small business owners received their certificates of completion. At the ceremony, he was also honoured with the award for Business Most Likely to Succeed. “I was overwhelmed,” he says. “I never thought that my business was seen as such a success. It was a joyful but humbling experience.”

Looking ahead, Dlongwana still has big plans. Waste to Food currently uses 10 worm hammock units to process five tons of compost per week. The company hopes

to secure funding to buy a HotRot vessel-composting system, and to grow the number of worm hammocks to 30, thereby increasing its capacity to 28 tons per week. Phumlani is also looking into a process for collecting waste water that, after treatment, can be used to irrigate the organisation's organic vegetable garden.

But it isn't just about growing vegetables. It's about creating jobs and making a difference in other people's lives. “Once we have secured the last of the funding needed to create 30 micro-franchises, we will supply earthworm hammocks to these owners so they can manage and run their own business,” Dlongwana says.

“We will then purchase the compost from them,” he continues. “Each owner will be employing an additional two to three people, so the number of jobs that we can create is quite substantial. This will also create valuable environmental awareness and education in our community.”

Besides making an impact in the townships of Philippi and Khayelitsha, Dlongwana would also like to start a day-care centre one day. With so many children on the streets and their parents either working or unable to take care of them, he wants to offer a safe place for the youth to receive education and food.

“Growing a business doesn't happen overnight,” he says. “You have to take it step by step. You need to have a passion and put everything you have in to it. And without knowledge you are not going to get far, so use every opportunity you get to learn.” **TBI**

For more information, visit <http://wtf.waste-to-food.co.za>.

STARTING SMALL

The University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) offers the Small Business Academy Programme to small business owners from low-income communities in greater Cape Town. It's an intensive nine-month course funded by the Distell Foundation and ABSA. If you know someone who, like Dlongwana, could benefit from the initiative, email sba@usb.ac.za, call Benji Matshoba on 021-918-4379 or visit www.usb.ac.za.sba.