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Artists from Ifa Lethu; Mxolisi Vilakazi and Michael Selekane share a light moment while reflecting on their works.
Pictures: Thobile Mathonsi

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A Pretoria NGO is attracting much attention from places such as the US, India and the UK for its approach in preserving the country's heritage while presenting youngsters with skills and opportunities.

Over the past three years, the Ifa Lethu Foundation, founded in 2005, has assisted 2 300 young practitioners in visual arts, crafts, sculpture and fashion.

Its part in the creation of 800 businesses has enabled it to manage the country's largest creative entrepreneurial development efforts.

Focusing on youths in communities where there are hardly job opportunities, building facilities where skills can be practised, putting members through entrepreneurial courses and assisting in getting them back to school are just some of the qualities that make the organisation special.

A lot is expected of the artists who join, chief executive Narissa Ramdhani said.



Student Mxolisi Vilakazi has been raising the flag in print making.
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“We’ll have a full review of the person’s work and get the local chiefs, community leaders, parents and whoever we can on board so that the artist stays committed.

“So thorough are we in what we do; we even make them sign contracts.”

Mxolisi Vilakazi, 25, from Snake Park, Soweto, who is under Ifa Lethu’s tutelage, said he had to leave college because of financial constraints.

“People will appreciate your work, but will not have the money to support it,” he said of his community.

Three years ago, he heard that Ifa Lethu would be hosting a workshop in the area, and youths were invited to submit their works.

He submitted his works and joined the organisation to star in one of its success stories.



Tshwane University of Technology fine art student Michael Selekane has made the Ifa Lethu Foundation proud for being a good ambassador.
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Moxy is a character in Vilakazi’s children’s booklet series which seeks to tell stories that kids as young as five can relate to and be informed by.

Now an entrepreneur, Vilakazi also creates puzzles and fridge magnets for children, with a shirt printing venture on the side.

These have been facilitated by the organisation, which has helped him enrol at the Artist Proof Studio in Newtown for studies.

Ifa Lethu youth ambassador Michael Selekane, also 25, from Mabopane, used to paint and store the paintings under his bed.

“As a child, I used to go to the waste dumps almost daily to collect things. I would try to put them together and make them beautiful. It was then that I first began expressing myself artistically.”

In later years Selekane could not believe he could make a living from his work in spite of the passion.

He was introduced to the late Michael Mmutle through an Ifa Lethu workshop in 2007, saw greener horizons, and never looked back.

In 2009, the two Michaels held a joint exhibition at the Grahamstown Art Festival.

Selekane staged a solo exhibition at the festival last year and another at the Pretoria Art museum last year.

He now has a studio in Midrand where he teaches aspiring artists and practises full-time.

“There is not enough education on art among black people. Look at the controversy around The Spearpainting by Brett Murray.

“He was not trying to provoke the president, but to express what he thinks when he looks at him. For example, when I look at Thabo Mbeki, I think of economic development and African Renaissance. When I look at Nelson Mandela, I think of sacrifice and freedom. When I look at Zuma, I think of many wives and corruption,” he said.

Ramdhani spoke of education in terms of linking skills development with business development.

She said it was impossible to create jobs for everyone and teaching young people to operate enterprises of their own could go a long way in alleviating poverty.

“Look at the Arab Spring; London riots; all through the power of the youth.

“In 1976, it was the youth who brought the world’s attention to South Africa, and the government should not forget that,” she said.

Having been invited to London to exhibit artworks twice last year, there is a chance Ifa Lethu’s Home & Away collection depicting the Struggle era could make its way to the upcoming Olympics, depending on sponsorship.

The organisation’s global profile is building, with Selekane set to address audiences in the UK on its work, vision, results, and his personal experience as a member, in May next year.

Ramdhani wants Ifa Lethu to be recognised as a proudly South African entity that has the foresight to change the world.

“We want to build an international profile that shows how powerful the model can be for economies of the world. To say to the world: Change your thinking and focus on these people (the youth).”