

A closer look at Tsogo Sun's entrepreneurs of the year

Tsogo Sun recently announced the finalists for its annual Tsogo Sun Entrepreneur of the Year Award competition - with finalists selected from the entrepreneurs and alumni benefitting from the Tsogo Sun Entrepreneurs programme. The programme was established in 2005 and supports emerging businesses in the tourism sector and other industries throughout the country.

We take a closer look at the five who beat the two hundred eligible to enter the awards this year.



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Noli Mini, Relax Spas

Mini, who has a passion for beauty and skincare and a penchant for business, has developed a unique spa concept, Relax Spas in partnership with various hotels in the Western Cape, offering in-room spa services to guests from a base within hotels. "We align our offering with the hotel brand, increasing the range of facilities that the hotel offers and provide high quality branded spa experiences for the guests," she says.

An additional aspect of Relax Spa's offering is to provide spa treatments at corporate wellness days. She is also introducing her own brand of beauty and skincare products.

Relax Spas has steadily been evolving and growing, creating employment and delivering an innovative service since it was just a dream in 2010. It has 10 full-time staff and three interns. The company is in the process of recruiting four full-time spa therapists to accommodate the growing demand for its

services.

Mini is also in the process of establishing an academy to train beauty therapists. "A challenge is that we have a lot of therapists asking for work, but they don't have a high enough standard of training for our services. Our academy will train to those standards, and the students will have access to hands-on practical training at Relax Spas, and the potential to be employed if they make the grade." The academy will start in 2018 with five students.

Mini is also active in social upliftment and has partnered with Relate Trust, an organisation that supports different NGOs. She sells their bracelets, handmade by women in a local township, and the proceeds go to the Amy Biehl Foundation, which offers training to unemployed young women in beauty skills, among other initiatives.

Although currently based in the Western Cape, Mini has her eyes set on a national footprint for Relax Spas in the future.

Mini joined Tsogo Sun Entrepreneurs at the end of 2016 and has been inspired by the rigorous training and coaching that the programme has provided over the last twelve months. "It has been and is a priceless journey," she says. "I feel validated that I'm doing something right and that I am building a footprint. I want to leave a strong legacy for my family, and a legacy of possibilities and opportunities for my brand. I want my industry to remember my presence as ground-breaking."

What is the biggest challenge you faced as an entrepreneur and how did you approach and overcome it?

Access to markets, hotels not embracing my concept and being seen as just a "Mobile Spa Therapist". I identified hotels and individuals in the hospitality industry that resonated with my brand values, those that saw the value that I add to their hotels and worked closely with them in fine-tuning my spa concept as they embraced my entrepreneurial flair. This was

very challenging at first as it meant working with fewer hotels and we took a dip in our revenue as a result but it was a positive life changing decision for me and my business in terms of positioning my brand with key players in the hospitality industry and this proved to be a great success.



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Hezron Louw, Sumting Fresh

Sumting Fresh is all that its name suggests – funky and fun, creating fabulous fresh food. It's the brainchild of Louw and his business partner Andrew Leeuw, a gourmet street food company with a food truck ('bus-taurant'), a catering division with a factory in Bramley, and a 'bricks and mortar' restaurant in Norwood.

"It started when Andrew and I met in a taxi years ago and discovered we shared a passion for food – we also realised that if we could just get started, we had the drive to make it. We borrowed from friends and family and put in all our savings to get the equipment we needed," says Louw.

The partners had seen a gap in the market for gourmet-style street food, and the innovative business has grown along with the trend. They started their first food trailer in Midrand in 2012 and worked hard to deliver great quality delicious fresh food and establish a loyal customer base. They began operating at the Fourways Farmers' Market and then expanded to other markets and to festivals.

Staff training is important and staff are encouraged to do short courses, appropriate to their interests and career choices. The company is a member of Productivity SA, which assists with self-development. "We share our experiences and business journey freely and openly, and encourage our staff to develop themselves," says Louw.

Environmental issues are another priority for the company. Louw says, "We constantly monitor our overall footprint and try to work efficiently and economically, incorporating initiatives such as composting organic waste, responsible disposal of used cooking oil and use of water and electricity, monitoring paper usage, and vehicle use."

Sumting Fresh is committed to social upliftment and is involved with Thusong Youth Centre, employing young people from their local community – in Bramleyview and Alexandra. "We've also identified young people from our Ennerdale community for mentoring and training in factory operations and we support waste traders in the factory environment, setting aside recyclable waste for the traders to collect and sell," Louw explains.

Future plans include continuing along the path of the strong growth trajectory that the business is on, but Louw recognises that the time has come to consolidate and build a stronger foundation. "We aim to ensure that our business is sustainable for a long time to come – and we see no reason why we can't eventually grow into an iconic South African brand such as Nando's or RocoMamas."

Sumting Fresh joined Tsogo Sun Entrepreneurs at the end of 2016 after attending a Supplier Showcase at Gold Reef City.

■ ***What are your secret ingredients to success – what are the key things entrepreneurs need to make a business venture work?***

A very strong sense of self - you need to know who you are before you can lead others.
You cannot be everything to everyone because you end up being nothing to no one.
Working smart and hard helps you be the best you can be.

Learn to fail - there have been times when I have thought to myself this can't fail and when it did fail I was devastated, but

over time I have learned to take the good with the bad. Also, know how to be a winner because winning is not easy at all.

Have a good smile, all entrepreneurs need a good smile to deal with all the rejection but it mostly comes in handy when you win.



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Fhumulani Nemukula, Ronem Maintenance Solutions

Nemukula from Nelspruit in Mpumalanga, founder and MD of Ronem Maintenance Solutions, was inspired into entrepreneurship many years ago when he encountered an elderly woman selling vetkoek on the side of the road. He learned that, through her small enterprise, she had managed to employ two people and pay for her two sons to go to university. “She was creating her own opportunities, even without any training or skills development. This made me realise that I too could achieve anything if I put my mind to it.”

Years later in 2015, when his passion for building maintenance and construction took root in his life, Nemukula remembered that resolute woman. Determined to combine his passion, the skills he had gained over the years, and the motivation she had inspired in him, he launched his own business.

Ronem Maintenance Solutions is a one-stop-shop for reliable and quality building maintenance services in construction, repair and maintenance. “What makes us different is that we offer solutions, we don’t just repair and maintain. This is an industry where customer service often needs fine tuning so we have developed a system that allows us to use our technical skills and our understanding of our customers’ needs to deliver what we call Ronem Solutions.”

Over the past 13 years, Nemukula has been involved in building maintenance in the hospitality and commercial sectors in South Africa and Mozambique. He is still employed by Broll Property Group in Nelspruit on a half-day basis, leaving him free to run his business as well. He has three full-time permanent employees, who include his brother as project manager and his wife, who has a BCom Accounting degree and manages the admin and books, and 21 casual employees – most of whom are employed from local townships where the rate of unemployment is high, and five of whom are women. He is also committed to bringing women into the industry.

“We work hard to develop young men and women from the local community and we do a lot of on-site training for our unskilled workers.” Taking it further, Ronem has also encouraged casual workers to become sub-contractors to his company, thus developing their own businesses and creating further employment.

Ronem is environmentally responsible and has developed its own policy that ensures that only energy saving lights and equipment is installed in new developments and recommended in refurbishments. The team is committed to complying with all dumping regulations.

Nemukula joined Tsogo Sun Entrepreneurs through a Supplier Showcase event held at Tsogo Sun’s Emnotweni Casino in Nelspruit. That was a positive experience in itself, he says, and led to new contracts. However, being invited to apply to join the Tsogo Sun Entrepreneur programme (at the end of 2016) has been wonderful and humbling. “It has given me the opportunity to learn from amazing entrepreneurs and it has inspired me to live my dreams.”

He says that since joining the programme, his company has become more constructive and focused. He has gained great value from the expert advice in different areas of running a business, from interaction with other entrepreneurs, and from the coaching sessions. “The coaching helped me to think out of the box. I have realigned the way I look at myself and my business. In simple terms, the coaching sessions have increased our bottom line.”

■ ***What do entrepreneurs in South Africa need to make a success of themselves?***

I hold a strong opinion that every entrepreneur needs a combination of passion, knowledge of the product they offer, desire to become an expert in what they do and ability to continuously improve in what they offer. But I also think it's important to acknowledge that a good marketing strategy, timing and sometimes simply being in the right place at the right time play a part in many success stories.

▣ ***How can the business environment be improved?***

The business environment can be improved through partnerships between established businesses and small businesses. This will enable small businesses to gain access to a pool of expert advice, knowledge and an opportunities that are available. Sometimes all a small business needs is a push in the right direction and someone to inspire and believe in them.



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Devina Dawkinun, Gemkids

Gemkids, founded by Dawkinun, is a daycare centre that represents the fulfilment of a vision, and special place where children are cared for, taught, inspired, encouraged, and entertained. Dawkinun started her career as a lecturer and researcher in Economics at the then University of Durban-Westville and worked as a researcher in the Department of Community Health. Funding for her post ran out in 2005 and finding herself jobless, Dawkinun decided to pursue her dream of working with children. She studied Early Childhood Development, focusing on the Montessori method, and in 2007 opened her first Montessori pre-school in Chatsworth in Durban. Later, she transformed this into a school of tuition for grades 1 to 7 learners.

About two years ago, Gemkids entered into a partnership agreement with Tsogo Sun's Suncoast property on the Durban beachfront and is now located at the entertainment destination as the hub where children are checked in by parents or guardians visiting Suncoast. "It's a daycare with a difference," says Dawkinun. "During school terms, we incorporate learning programmes according to the school curriculum into our activities with the children, and

during the holidays we provide fun, theme-based learning and life skill development activities."

Gemkids has eleven staff members, six of whom are child-minders on the Suncoast Promenade, taking care of children at the Suncoast complex, and five are child-minders in the day care centre itself. The centre can accommodate up to 20 children at a time. Staff training is essentially on-the-job, but also entails certification in first-aid for children, employee health and safety and fire-fighting, arranged through the Suncoast partnership.

In terms of community upliftment, Gemkids is involved in some of Suncoast's community upliftment activities, but is also running a Gemkids Donate a Handful Drive, which encourages staff to contribute "a handful" of whatever they are using to prepare a meal (particularly non-perishable food items) towards hampers that will be distributed to needy families during the Christmas holidays. "Apart from the real need in our poorer communities, this is also helping our staff to change their mindsets from one of lack to one of abundance. It helps them escape a victim mentality."

Dawkinun was encouraged by Suncoast management to apply to the Tsogo Sun Entrepreneurs programme, and was thrilled when she was accepted. "It has given me a level of confidence that I didn't know I was capable of. I have learned to become more professional in my approach, and I gained real skills in the financial and operational aspects of my business."

▣ ***What does the future hold for Gemkids?***

I see Gemkids becoming a national household name, known for our value-adding influence to communities and society at large in the field of education by virtue the business being strategically located at Suncoast Casino and Entertainment

World, an entertainment hub in Durban, and my relationship and association with Tsogo Sun through the Entrepreneurship Programme.



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Nicole Msibi, Before Time Indlondlo Events

The dad and daughter Soweto-based enterprise – Before Time Indlondlo Events, a catering and events equipment and décor hire company – was launched when a gap in the market was identified about five years ago and has grown steadily, with a strong 70% year-on-year growth this year.

Msibi, co-founder with her father Nick Msibi, says they had both been in the hospitality industry, she in catering and as a function organiser, and he as a chef for 30 years. They noticed that at practically every event in Soweto, equipment was hired. It made sense to invest in the sector. Nick resigned from his job and with his pension package, they set up their business, with a warehouse for their equipment based in Protea Glen.

Having her own business had been a dream of Msibi's and she says they put their hearts and souls – and lots of sacrifices – into making it a success.

“What makes the business special is that we don't only talk service. We make sure that our customers experience value-added service that goes beyond just providing equipment for hire.” Though they started with equipment hire, they recently extended their portfolio to include doing décor at events and catering – to harness Chef Nick's skills.

While their focus is on Gauteng and particularly Soweto and the surrounds, the business reach is “all over the country” says Nicole. They recently went as far afield as Free State and North West, and are prepared to travel wherever needed.

Before Time has four directors – all family members – four permanent staff members, and four part-time employees. Staff training and development is according to passion and skills, says Nicole, whose responsibilities in the company include operations and customer management, office administration and bookkeeping. “In future, I intend to enrol staff in courses that will encourage and grow them as individuals, and the company as well.”

Future plans include a strong market penetration strategy to grow the business and become well known and respected in the industry. At this stage, Msibi is proud of the fact that Before Time has been given the opportunity to service major clients such as Sandton Convention Centre, Rand Club, and Bidvest. She has also identified a need in Soweto for an efficiently run conference centre that can accommodate about 200 people – for meetings, conferences, celebrations, weddings, and other events.

Social upliftment and “giving back” is also important to Before Time. The company supports vulnerable children, providing school girls with sanitary protection, school fees for children who cannot afford to pay, and school shoes for children who don't have any.

Msibi joined Tsogo Sun Entrepreneurs at the end of 2016, having exhibited at the Tsogo Sun Entrepreneurs Showcase at Gold Reef City Theme Park. “The programme means a lot to me. I have gained self-esteem and I can communicate with people more easily. The coaching helped me believe in myself, work on my goals, collaborate with other businesses in my area, and hold regular staff meetings,” says Msibi. The programme also improved her small business management, business strategy development, and financial and marketing skills.

■ **What is the most valuable piece of advice you can give to other entrepreneurs in the industry?**

Never stop building meaningful relationships with customers and other people in your industry. Choosing to instead view competitors as potential partners and collaborators can positively impact your business in a big way.

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