



crafter's profile



Zizamele Ceramics

by Sean Houghton

Five years ago, the Noordhoek Campus of False Bay College offered a learnership in Craft Production with ceramics as the core subject. This was sponsored by SETA (the Skills Education Training Authority) as part of a job-creation project. Fifteen people were chosen from the 60 applicants, and five of those who completed the course were chosen to take part in a 'Learn-and-Earn' programme.

As their skills and confidence grew, the artists began to produce work that began to sell and earn small incomes for the artists.

Clever marketing, including attending various décor- and trade-fairs, has spread the word of the unique ceramic artefacts coming out of Zizamele, and demand for the work has grown enormously. Today, they are selling their work from the studio on the Noordhoek Campus and in selected galleries, craft and curio shops around Cape Town, and are even exporting their wares around the world, with regular buyers in Japan, Namibia and the USA.

Part of the credit for this success story must go to the artists themselves: Sisanda Mbana, Signoria Solontsi, Joyce Mfene, Vuyelwa Katshwa and Lungile Siphike, who have seized the lifeline offered them when they were unemployed with both hands, and have not let

go. Their dedication, discipline and talent have seen them grow as people who have become the perfect example of what empowerment is all about.

The bulk of the credit however, should go to Toni Burton, as reluctant as she may be to accept it.

Toni is the lecturer who gave the original training course and continued to mentor the artists through the learn-and-earn programme. Toni believes deeply and passionately in Zizamele and what the artists have achieved. It is Toni who has taught and mentored the artists. It is she who is training them in business management and life-skills. The clever marketing that has brought them renown and success was driven by Toni.

"This is not about me," she says. "It is about these four women and one man who have taken ownership of this project and breathed life into it."

It was Toni who refused to shut the project down when ordered to by False Bay College.

"How could we?" Toni asks. "I couldn't tell these people to go after having taught them so much and brought them so far, only to see them unemployed again."

Eventually Toni resigned from the College and took a lease on the





studio to continue running the programme as a business. The logo for Zizamele, which means 'to develop' in Xhosa, is an image of the oxpecker (or tickbird), which spends most of its life riding on the back of a large antelope. This symbolises the perfect, symbiotic relationship which sees the birds keeping the animals free of ticks while being fed.

Toni is currently training the artists to become leaders and managers who can oversee the training of new artists, thus spreading the empowerment generated by Zizamele to other unemployed people.

"We will not pay the students while they are training, so that only

those as dedicated and suitable for the work as the original five will make it here," Toni states.

The latest trainee is Songezu Mrwebi, who is remarkably dedicated according to Toni and, in due course, should join the others as a fully-fledged member of Zizamele.

Any individuals, B&Bs, hotels or lodges that wish to see or buy Zizamele Ceramics may do so at the Noordhoek Campus of False Bay College or at the Longbeach Craft Market. ☺

