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FIGHTING SPIRIT

KHAYELITSHA’S MILLION DOLLAR BABY THROWS THE PUNCHES, CHANGES LIVES

By Yazeed Kamaldien
Andiswa Madikane is 26, unemployed, a single mother of two children and shares a two-bedroom makeshift house with eight other relatives in Khayelitsha.

Her way to the top, and that teary-eyed finale, would be that she trains young girls how to throw punches at a township boxing gym while making a difference in their lives. Glory would be hers in this Hollywood version of reality.

There's no triumphant Hollywood soundtrack or Oscar-winning ending in sight yet. But all the dramatic challenges exist.

Every other day, Madikane carries her tattered exercise bike into her backyard.

"I have a punching bag as well but I don't have a place for it," says the eldest of six siblings.

Madikane fixes the chain and starts cycling. Her neighbours and curious onlookers turn to watch her cycle, seemingly to nowhere. After a 30-minute cycle, Madikane jogs to the Khayelitsha Site-C Sports Complex where she skips, does sit-ups and faces the punching bag.

The community hall, doubling as a sports centre, doesn't have separate training facilities for males and females. Young women train alongside the guys.

Madikane began boxing when she was 12 and soon competed professionally. At the hall, she now guides younger girls on how to box as part of the Boxgirls International training programme, launched in Cape Town in 2009 by executive director Heather Cameron.

The programme has focused on boxing training for girls in Berlin, Germany, since 2001. A second training centre opened in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2007 and the third was initiated in Cape Town after Cameron met University of the Western Cape (UWC) sports
studies academics, who wanted to work with the programme here.

Coping mechanism

For Madikane, throwing punches has changed her life for the good; it’s her coping mechanism. At the hall, she paces around the punching bag. She focuses on her footwork. But her thoughts are far from here.

“My problem was that I didn’t usually speak to people about how I felt inside. I used to hide my feelings about what makes me angry or sad. Then my coach said that I should not keep my problems inside,” she recalls between swings at the bag.

“He said if you don’t feel comfortable talking to someone, talk to the punching
Andrews Madikane trains alongside other young women who are part of the Boxgirls programme.

and do it well."

What began as a personal journey of both physical and emotional release soon transformed Madikane into a role model.

"When you box, you’re teaching the younger kids look up to you...I now look at myself as someone who can make a difference," she says confidently.

"You get respect and people admire you."

university. We find that a lot of these girls who are poor feel intimidated. We want them to feel more secure. They have a right to be leaders."

Of course, there’s also the physical self-defence element for girls who live under the constant threat of gender-based violence.

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— Heather Cameron

You’re not doing bad stuff and you are together. One parent told me that her daughter was showing her exercises that she could do as well. She thanked me for that."

Boxing champion

UWC’s sports studies students are involved in devising nutrition and exercise programmes for Boxgirls participants. Cameron, a former Berlin boxing champion, works with existing clubs in Cape Town’s low-income areas Khayelitsha, Atlantis and Mfuleni township near Ocean View.

For Cameron, Boxgirls is about merging sport and social transformation: "This is about using a fighting sport to help girls know their strength and transform their communities."

"You learn how to work as a team," she adds. "It’s a good way to learn about being a contributing member to your community and democracy. Girls learn to be...prepared and confident for bigger things."

Madikane is living proof of the concept as she, along with her male counterparts, organises local events. And the boxing training she offers is complemented by workshops on local government, media skills and career advice.

The focus of Boxgirls has always been on empowering "girls who are most vulnerable", emphasises Cameron. "Rich, young South African girls don’t need my help...Our girls are smart and ambitious but they just need someone to explain to them how to get to huge issues of violence," says Cameron. "We don’t teach them to hit people. We teach them not to put up with accepting male physical domination."

"They could hurt guys who come too close to them," she points out. "They feel confident and they feel that their bodies are worth protecting."

Recruiting more girls

For Madikane, who trains 20 girls in Khayelitsha aged nine to 24, being involved with Boxgirls has convinced her of the need to grow the sport among her gender: "I want to let people know that there is women’s boxing in the Western Cape. There are too few ladies doing boxing in Khayelitsha. We are trying to recruit more girls. We want them to get involved."

While she may not have fame and riches, Madikane’s achievements and life experiences are a strong enticement for others. She has won amateur championship competitions in the Western Cape in 2002, 2004 and in 2005. "When you box you go places and meet people you have never seen," she says, "you don’t just stay in Khayelitsha."

Top of her list of experiences is when she met Lelia Ali, daughter of the famous boxing legend Muhammad Ali, when she visited Cape Town in 2006. "It was like a dream come true to meet Lelia. I only saw her on TV before. I was excited. She’s someone I can look up to. I want to be like her. She can box and she’s a lady."