

News



Technology is nothing. What's important is that you have faith in people, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they'll do wonderful things with them.
— Apple co-founder Steve Jobs



INziswa "Pinky" Mcinga was 23 years old and at a dead end when computers came to her community in the deep rural region of Dwesha on the Eastern Cape's Wild Coast.

"I completed my matric in Dwesha in 2001 and afterwards I worked here and there as a domestic worker in East London, but what I really wanted to do was study," explains Mcinga.

Her prospects for tertiary education were nonexistent because her father, Fundile Mcinga, who raised her and who lives in Dwesha, is unemployed and lives on a disability grant.

She also has a young daughter and three siblings to look after.

Many people in the villages that populate Dwesha's mountainous landscape are in a similar position, surviving on government grants and subsistence agriculture.

Globalisation has bypassed this place where the closest town, Willowvale, is 40km away. Plenty of time and money is spent on transport to Willowvale for shopping and business. Endless hours are dedicated to fetching fire wood because several villages do not have electricity.

"My family was really struggling and I had returned to Dwesha to be with them when I heard about this computer project called the Siyakhula Living Lab that Rhodes and Fort Hare universities were doing in our community," says Mcinga.

"I discovered they were offering training to anyone who wanted to learn computer skills or ICT (information and communication technology). I immediately started attending. It was an opportunity to learn for free and I grabbed it."

The Siyakhula Living Lab was initiated by Professor Alfredo Terzoli, head of the Telkom Centre of Excellence in Distributed Multimedia in the department of computer science at Rhodes University.

"We partner with the Telkom Centre of Excellence in ICT for development at the University of Fort Hare on this project and we feel it is extremely important, especially when you consider that more than 60% of the population has no access to the internet or any knowledge of how ICT can enhance their lives. Some can do the basics on cellphones, but that is not enough," Terzoli explains.

Its biggest drive is to create effective and sustainable access to ICT in marginalised rural and peri-urban communities. "It brings a sense of being part of the world to people in remote rural areas, people who too often live with a sense that life happens elsewhere," says Terzoli.

Schools with electricity in Dwesha were selected as the community hubs.

In consultation with school principals and residents, everyone agreed the whole community should benefit from the computers and be taught to use them.

The Siyakhula training team of postgraduate students started to regularly visit Dwesha from 2006 and has continued to do so ever since.

The team currently includes five master's and three PhD students from Rhodes, and seven master's and four PhD students from Fort Hare.

"At Fort Hare and at Rhodes we set out to develop students to not only complete their degrees, but to be sensitive to development issues and ethical leadership. We really hope when they leave us to go out into the world, they go with a heartfelt need to help others, which is what the Siyakhula Living Lab is all about," says Professor Mamello Thinyane, head of the Telkom Centre of Excellence in the department of computer science at Fort Hare.

The first installation in 2006 was at Mngame Junior Secondary School, which has 159 pupils. Five computers were installed in its staff room.

Siyakhula now has 17 participating schools with pupils from Grade R to matric. Some of the schools have between 400 and 600 pupils.

"They were excited by the arrival of technology and got the hang of using the computers, email, social media and the internet pretty quickly," says Terzoli. "Typically, young people learn ICT faster and the more time they spend on the computers, the more they learn. From the community side, the women in particular have come to the schools to learn."

One of these women was Mcinga. A fast learner and highly motivated, she quickly picked up the skills. "I surprised myself because I was not a brilliant student at school," she says.

"What I have in my favour is I always loved reading and finding out new things. Even if I saw a newspaper lying in the road, I would pick it up, grab my dictionary and look up the words I didn't understand."

One of the first searches Mcinga did on the internet was to look at South African university sites to see what was available to study. She is a natural leader and started leading the teams from Rhodes and Fort Hare to train residents. "I was learning and teaching at the same time," she

PLUGGED IN ON THE WILD COAST

A project spearheaded by two universities is bringing a whole new world to a rural community in the Eastern Cape. Heather Dugmore visits the Siyakhula Living Lab in Dwesha



Pinky Mcinga started out as a keen student at Siyakhula Living Lab and is now a member of the team at Reed House Systems

explains. "It helped that I was from Dwesha because I could identify with how people were feeling. Some were shy and intimidated by the students and academics because they knew they were from the universities. Many people in Dwesha are not educated or are less educated. It also helped that I speak Xhosa."

The project created the opportunity for skills development, networking and exposure for Mcinga, who subsequently got a job as an administrative clerk at one of the Siyakhula Living Lab schools.

"I worked there during school hours and then trained people from the community in the computer lab in the afternoons," she says. With some understanding of hardware and software, she also doubled as the "technician" on occasions when the computers stopped working. "I'd call Rhodes and they would explain to me what to do over the phone."

The Siyakhula Living Lab uses open source software called Ubuntu Linux. It's free, resilient and robust, and there have been no problems with viruses, and relatively few problems with computers freezing and crashing.

This is essential in a setting where technical expertise is unavailable.

"It is also available in African languages, which made it possible to run some of the Dwesha training sessions in Xhosa, with Xhosa teaching materials," explains Professor Lorenzo Dalvit, MTN chair of media and mobile communication at Rhodes.

He was part of the first Siyakhula Living Lab team to visit the Dwesha community seven years ago. Dalvit also spearheaded the translation of the Google search interface into Xhosa through Rhodes University's school of languages. "The next step is to translate parts of Wikipedia into Xhosa," he adds.

An important part of the Siyakhula Living Lab's vision is to create a channel via a platform it has developed called TeleWeaver.

This will allow interested parties, notably the government, to interact with people in marginalised communities. Interactions can include registering births and deaths, and sending health messages through the eHealth application.

The channel is also useful for activities such as the online selling of traditional craft work or the promotion of microtourism.

The project has made an enormous difference to Dwesha residents' lives. "Because of the Siyakhula Living Lab, Dwesha is now seen as a place where things happen rather than as a place that is isolated from the rest of the world," says Mcinga.

"I have personally changed a lot. I now see myself as someone with important skills and plenty of opportunities."

Mcinga's story has been made into an SABC2 documentary called Pinky And The Computer to inspire other young people from rural areas.

She has moved to Grahamstown and is now a member of the team at the Reed House Systems software company hosted at Rhodes that specialises in software suitable for rural areas. She is collaborating on the creation of e-services to be deployed in Dwesha and is studying to be a social worker through Unisa.

"We believe there are a whole lot of Pinkys out there who can benefit from ICT for development in a whole lot of ways and we want to do more," says Professor Thinyane.



Lindelwa Jongidiza completed her first computer skills training course in 2009. She is helping a group of women in Dwesha who make traditional Xhosa crafts to create a website and to market their work over the internet. Jongidiza is a Grade 4, 5 and 6 teacher at Ngwane Junior Secondary School, Dwesha, which has 182 pupils from Grade R to Grade 9
| PHOTOS: SIYAKHULA LIVING LAB



Professor Alfredo Terzoli, head of the Telkom Centre of Excellence in Distributed Multimedia in the department of computer science at Rhodes University, helps pupils at Ngwane Junior Secondary School, which is part of the Siyakhula Living Lab project

“
I have personally changed a lot. I now see myself as someone with important skills and plenty of opportunities
”
— PINKY MCINGA



A village in Dwesha. The closest town is Willowvale, 40km away

17
The number of schools that are part of the Siyakhula Living Lab project

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