

Black or White?

First published in the February 2006 issue of *ESKOM NEWS*

In the normal course of our lives most of us meet lots of different people, but how often are we deeply touched by the experience? Those who have had the privilege of an exchange with exceptional individuals like Nelson Mandela have a valuable memory to cherish. But when the energy, drive and wisdom of a man like Madiba comes packaged unexpectedly in the form of a 21 year old, the encounter is truly extraordinary.

Meeting Mongezi Ngidi made just such an impression on me. In Ngidi's short years he has courageously dealt with a lifetime of challenging experiences; any one of which would have sent lesser mortals scurrying into playing the role of victim permanently. Instead Ngidi is a triumph of the human spirit. His story begins with albinism – an inherited condition that effects skin pigmentation - and had he not been born in South Africa, this would have added many complications to his life, but it wouldn't have made his existence downright difficult.

As a white/black person living in a country where race is highly visible, Ngidi has experienced prejudice from all sides of the colour spectrum. Not only did his biological father reject him but he has also been on the receiving end of a few particularly cruel and vicious racist attacks. Some of these involved absurd confrontations with a few 'whiteys' who took offence at the idea of a black person sharing their skin colour.

But instead of going into hiding, these events spurred Ngidi on to put pen to paper and through the telling of his life story he has encapsulated how preposterous racial issues are in South Africa. In 2005 he self-published his book called *BLACK or WHITE: What's the Difference? My Journey with Albinism*.

For most people, writing a book is a significant enough challenge, but for Ngidi the ordeal was intensified because along with his form of albinism comes a severe visual disability, making reading or writing arduous. Yet, even this does not deter the spirit of this energetic second-year BA student at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

In his own words Ngidi says: “Instead of viewing albinism as a condition defined by a lack of colouring in the body, it can be seen as showing us the colour that defines us all as human beings first. Albinism is the colour that expresses what truly makes a person, a person. In my case it is both a beautiful representation and a celebration of black and white as one. I would never give up being this beautiful ‘black’, ‘white’ or ‘colourful’ person that I am. I am a human being first, AND I am an African with albinism.”

Now you rightly may agree that in his short existence this young man has indeed had much to deal with but just when he was starting to find his own path in life, his mother died. Ngidi has two younger sisters, one of whom shares his condition and the tragic loss of his mother meant that at age 19 he suddenly acquired two dependents. Undeterred, this highly resourceful young man finds ways of putting himself and his two sisters through their tertiary education.

I first met Ngidi on a particularly hot summer’s day and although harsh sunlight is to albinism what radiation is to our more normal hide, he made no excuses and even failed to mention that he would need to walk to our meeting point. The first thing that struck me about him was that his cheerful disposition belies the tough life he has had. But what impressed me was that unlike most people who make excuses or bury their pain by hiding behind a façade, Ngidi is authentic and deals with his experiences by integrating whatever life has dished out to him. Rather than trying to attract sympathy by turning his problems into a metaphorical ‘wooden leg’, he regards the difficulties he has had as a blessing; even stating that without his condition he may have had to struggle against being ordinary.

When it comes to ‘counting our blessings’ Ngidi is one of the few people I know who has got it right. Most people understand this saying to mean looking purely at the good things that have happened in their lives. But on the contrary Ngidi has found his inspiration and determination from being tested in so many adverse ways. And he is emphatic that it is exactly these testing circumstances that have allowed him to experience just how strong and courageous he really is. Counting blessings in adversity doesn’t require any special gift or talent; it simply takes making a choice about how we view our circumstances - do we see them in a positive or negative light?

An encounter with this inspiring young man leaves one feeling mildly ashamed about the trivial moans and groans so many of us wail about. Like him we too have the choice to turn our perceived ‘handicaps’ into blessings that make me uniquely me and you distinctively you. So what if we lose a few bucks on a calculated risk, put on a few pounds or don’t get that increase or promotion; these things are just life’s ‘small stuff’ and any such event hardly deserves the amount of perspiration we afford it.

Astonishingly this young man is also able to live the principles of abundant living, even although for him physical resources are in short supply. But he gives what he can and if there's no money to support others, he gives his time. Concerned about the ignorance surrounding his condition, he started a support group in Pietermaritzburg and is in the process of setting up a writer's circle to help other aspirant young authors get published. Giving for Ngidi is a natural way of life and whenever I have been fortunate enough to have souls like Ngidi cross my path, it leads me to wonder why it is that the 'haves' are the ones who do the least but moan the most.

Meeting such a young man is truly a humbling experience, for without any formal education in a subject like emotional intelligence, Ngidi - from the time he was 15 - has lived according to these principles. I have no doubt that his determination will eventually be rewarded when he is conferred the accolade of being another South African Great.

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