

Giving poverty the boot

Two men are stepping up to defy patriarchy and address the needs of disadvantaged schoolgirls by climbing Africa's highest mountain, writes Kevin Ritchie

THERE'S a pair of hiking boots in a glass box in Sello Hatang's office. They're caked in mud, dried now. Untouched since those same boots carried him up Kilimanjaro three years ago and down again.

This year, the chief executive of the Nelson Mandela Foundation is trudging back up the arduous 5895m slog to the highest point in Africa.

He'll do it again next year and the year after, as part of a commitment he made to himself five years ago. Codenamed 2020, he wants to have reached two million girls, helping them to stay in school, while breaking the taboo on menstruation.

Five years ago, Richard Mabaso phoned him. "We speak about the key drivers of patriarchy and toxic masculinity as the issues holding us back as a nation, and here was this young man calling me from a tickety box to tell me about his dream to raise funds to provide sanitary pads for poor girls and keep them in school, by climbing Kilimanjaro," says Hatang.

"I saw the potential immediately," he remembers.

Trek4Mandela, run by the Imbumba Foundation which Mabaso formed, aims to summit the continent's highest peak every year on July 18, Madiba's birthday, raising awareness of the Caring4Girls campaign and funds to buy sanitary pads for underprivileged schoolgirls.

The Nelson Mandela Foundation has endorsed it since Mabaso and local Everest legend Sibusiso Vilane first summited together in 2012.

But Hatang didn't climb the mountain immediately. "Three years ago, the managing director of the Banking Association, Cas Coovadia, said to me, 'you're always challenging us and you keep going to the airport to see us off, isn't it time you put your own body behind it?'"

It struck a chord with Hatang. He had just completed his Desmond Tutu Fellowship the year before and a key component was the need to create community projects. He went back to his hometown, Klerksdorp, to push the Trek4Mandela not just to increase the number of beneficiaries, but to get them to participate, raising funds to help others in need.

"How much more can we build the Madiba legacy than to get people to take charge of their own lives?" he asks rhetorically.

"Richard and I went to Klerksdorp and challenged women to raise funds for sanitary pads."

"It was right there that Hatang had his next epiphany."

"A group of women who had been helping us with our quest went to the office of one of the managers and she made them close the door before she started weeping."

"They had no idea what was happening. They looked at



Nelson Mandela Foundation CEO Sello Hatang flexes his muscles next to his prized Kilimanjaro summit boots in their glass case in his office.

each other in embarrassment, wondering what they had done to cause offence. Suddenly the woman looked at them through her tears, 'I was once that girl', she said.

"Immediately I thought of my own childhood, of an illiterate mother who gave her all to educate my two brothers and my three sisters. Her one son died, but she got the

rest of us educated. She never compromised. We had to be at school, rain or shine, sick or healthy. The only exceptions were my sisters – at a certain time each month.

"It only dawned on me then that it might have been because my sisters had the same struggle."

"We are trying to build a value-based system for our society in the post-Mandela era."

"How can care be more than ensuring people don't lose their dignity? I remember what Gerry Elsdon said when she summited Kilimanjaro: 'We climb Kili so no child must climb a mountain when they go to school'."

"If we are to be the legacy, as the foundation enjoins us in this centenary year, if we are to find the Madiba in ourselves, we must find ways of changing the life of at least one person."

He tells the story of when he went to a Tembisa school talking to children about Mandela Day. The organisers had run out of high leather chairs for the dignitaries on the podium, so Hatang found a stackable chair among the kids.

He found himself next to Nthabiseng. She was using crutches.

"I asked her: 'Were you born like this?' She said: 'No, I woke up like this one morning in 2010. I couldn't move. My parents thought I was kidding'."

The doctor confirmed she was paralysed.

That same year, she lost her mother, but, says Hatang in wonder, Nthabiseng was a bundle of joy and energy determined not to let her circumstances get her down.

"If that had been my child, I would have gone for a second opinion, a third, a fourth. She never got that chance."

"Her parents couldn't give that to her. That's the burden I'm talking about."

This is a particularly special year for the foundation, marking the centenary of



The man behind Caring4Girls and Trek4Mandela, Richard Mabaso, helps an aspirant trekker choose the right thickness of mitts for this year's Kilimanjaro ascent. PICTURES: KEVIN RITCHIE



Trek4Mandela Centenary hopeful Paige Lindenberg tries out the sleeping bag she will be using on the slopes of Kilimanjaro in July this year.

Mandela's birthday. April 9 will mark the start of the 100-day countdown to Mandela Day on July 18, when a whole raft of initiatives will be announced, all focusing on the three-pronged approach of building a values-based society, being the legacy and finding the Madiba in ourselves.

"The key," says Hatang, "is to build our society through service, not just for 67 minutes once a year, but service every day."

The foundation has endorsed over 500 projects, of which Trek4Mandela is one. Some will run from April and others will run the entire year until July 18, next year.

On April 27 there will be a special discussion on Madiba's legacy at the United Nations in Geneva, focusing on how to rid the world of racism, while

July 18 will see a special debate at the UN General Assembly in New York on his legacy.

"In South Africa," says Hatang, "the special focus will be on poverty and inequality, focusing on how we can respond to statistics that suggest 25% of all children suffer from stunting as a result of malnutrition."

Early childhood development centres will be another priority.

"We need to ensure that 100% of all children between nought and 6 are in these centres. You know, we're obsessed by old-age pensions and grants and who will pay for them and distribute them, but what about the children?"

"Instead of caring, we are actually poisoning the future."

"How are the children who are not privileged supported?"

he asks. "One of my colleagues, Khalil Goga, always reminds us 'we are investing in a future that will not have people that will inherit it'."

This year will be the one year that Hatang doesn't summit Kilimanjaro on July 18.

He can't because he will be overseeing the Mandela Day celebrations back here and hosting one of the biggest ever international guest speakers to present the annual Mandela Day lecture the day before the summit.

But he'll be back on top of the world on August 9, when he leads a special expedition of CEOs and foreign ambassadors to Kilimanjaro to remember Mandela on Women's Day.

The boots in the glass case in his office are there for a reason. Climbing the mountain

resonates with him in so many ways, the analogies presenting themselves at every step upwards.

"We all carry a heavy burden, the least we can do is lighten the load for those who can't do it for themselves," he says.

"As we climb Kilimanjaro, there are the guys who carry our stuff for us. We only carry between 5 and 10kg of water; food and personal kit. These guys carry the rest, 20kg – from day one."

"Everyone wants to summit some mountain. The porters' mountain could be anything from just getting out of poverty to creating a better life for their children. They're lightening my load and yours for us to succeed, to get to the top of the actual mountain. In turn, we must lighten the loads for the generations to come."

Mountain of clothing, courage and commitment needed to conquer Kilimanjaro

Kevin Ritchie
COMMENT

THERE'S a helluva lot of kit to climb Kilimanjaro. It's hot in Joburg, even hotter in the middle of Sandton City, it's difficult to think that in four months' time – almost to the day – I should be at the highest point of Africa.

It's all very surreal – the prospect of the climb, and the fitting session. One thing's for sure, I won't be freezing my backside off, at least not under four sets of pants, if you count the long johns or – in the parlance of the modern outdoors enthusiast – "thermal underwear".

On top of that will go the hiking pants, wicked to help you sweat and then

dry. I'm sweating at the exertion of getting what looks like fleece tracksuit pants over them and then a pair of padded summit trousers. There'll be three sets of socks under the boots, which I'm pleased to see are the normal hiking boots beloved of those who navigate malls on Saturdays or stand around braais afterwards.

Up top, there's a grandpa vest (thermal underwear, once again), a nylon long sleeved T-shirt and then a three-in-one jacket. There are inner gloves that go into mittens, which wouldn't have looked out of place on Robert Falcon Scott's ill-fated expedition to the Antarctic. There's a beanie. We'll get scarves, too.

I know that whatever happens, I will never get cold – or wet – sitting in the stands at Ellis Park in a Highveld winter.

We will also be carrying backpacks – courtesy of manufacturers Thule who have come on board the Trek4Mandela Centenary edition as sponsors. The backpacks carry your food, your water bottles and all the kit that you will be wearing.

The truth of the matter is that when you climb, you're perennially moderating your temperature, taking top layers off and putting them on.

Kilimanjaro lies close to the equator. We'll probably start in trail running shoes with the legs actually zipped off the pants. By Day 5 we'll look like Teletubbies – at least I will – to avoid frostbite at -20°C, 5895m above sea level. By Day 6 we will almost be back in takkies, T-shirts and shorts, fighting off mosquitoes as we go through the tropical rain

KEEPING THE #GIRLCHILD IN SCHOOL
SMS "KEVIN" TO 42513 TO PLEDGE R30*

forest. It's all a bit bewildering. Luckily, I've met William Tsoai, who works at the Sandton branch of Cape Union Mart, where we are getting most of our kit.

Tsoai is that rare outdoors outfitter who's not spouting book learning, but speaking from experience. He's been up Kili himself, as well as going to Everest base camp

– courtesy of winning the company's salesman of the year award twice.

He's full of useful tips, like storing your water bottle upside down on the last night – because the water will freeze at the top. Like making sure that everything fits and that you are fit for purpose.

You've got to be fit, he says.

"Respect the mountain, respect yourself, communicate with your fellow climbers, don't lie."

"Listen to your body, tell your tent mates how you feel because altitude can get to anyone."

He knows. When he climbed Kilimanjaro, he was sick the first day, but the weight of expectation that he put on himself, not to let down his colleagues and his friends was so great, that he pushed through to the summit. When he got back to

Johannesburg, he got rid of his kit. Every last bit.

Six months later, he started climbing again from scratch.

"I think you need about four months to train," Tsoai says.

"You can go to the gym, but the best is to be outdoors as much as possible, hiking and doing the Westcliff Stairs. They're the best, because when you're on Kili, your knees go. Most people get as far as Stella Point (5756m), they can't go the next couple of 100m up to Uhuru peak."

"Look at (Everest legend) Sibusiso Vilane, he doesn't go to the gym. He climbs and he runs."

Fitness is a big issue for Tsoai. He will do Kilimanjaro again, but now he wants to climb Mount Aconcagua in the Andes, the highest point outside the Himalayas at

6960m. First, though, he has to prove he's fit enough – by running at least 22km.

To do Kili, he reckons, you should be able to run 5km as well as master the Westcliff Stairs.

I gulp. I haven't even done a fun run or a Park Run.

"Don't worry," he says, "that mountain is here to stay. It's not leaving Africa any time soon. If you don't make it for whatever reason, you can do it again."

"Wear warm, eat well, sleep well, know your body and listen to your guides."

Ritchie is part of this year's Trek4Mandela Centenary expedition to raise awareness and money for sanitary pads to keep young women in school. If you would like to support Caring4Girls SMS Kevin to 42513 to pledge R30 towards this cause.