

CHASE

FEATURE

QUEENS OF THE DANCE...

Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR) chief executive SHARON GILL talks to Sithule Moyo and her daughters.

I was a real honour to be able to interview not only Sithule Moyo, but some of her amazingly talented family too.

I have been working in Rotherham for nearly eight years now and very early on I was aware of Sithule and her commitment to enriching the cultural life in Rotherham, and how active she was in the voluntary and community sector, sitting on many different networks and boards.

I also heard her speak about her journey to our country from Zimbabwe at an event run by the Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance (REMA), and as with many migrants, refugees and asylum seekers stories, I am humbled by how easy I have it being born in this country, and all the freedoms and rights I expect to have.

It was in 2006 that the Home Office first located Sithule in Southend, and after two years relocated her and her family to Rawmarsh, Rotherham. It is so heartwarming to hear Sithule say that from the very first day she arrived in Rotherham she felt like she had come home, that the community were very welcoming. It seems that Southend did not embrace her and her baby with quite the same warmth.

She very quickly joined St Joseph's Church and was introduced to a community.

It was in 2009 that her work in the voluntary sector began as a volunteer for the Refugee Centre. This position led to sitting on the Scrutiny Panel hosted by Rotherham

Metropolitan Borough Council, which looked after tenants to ensure they received access to services and challenged any inherent discrimination. They delivered events and ran conferences. This led to representing residents from Rawmarsh on the Ward Panel, and this is how she came into contact with the organisation Rotherfed.

It was while working with Rotherfed that Sithule accessed training to help develop community groups and to be a community engagement officer. With these new skills she was able to assist as secretary with other residents of Rawmarsh to set up the Ashgrove TARA.

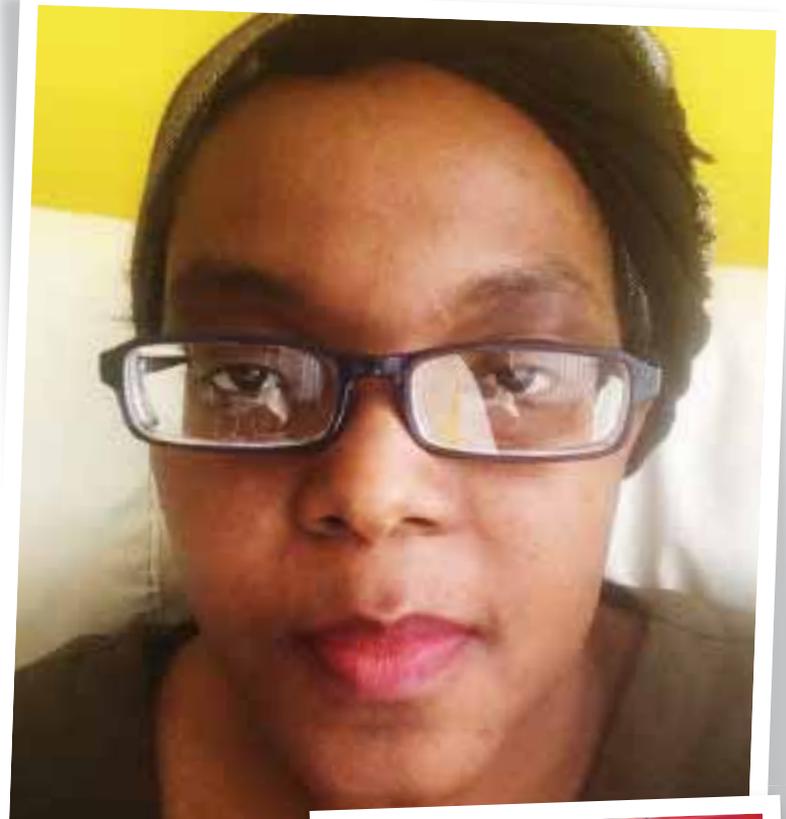
If that was not enough of a tale of how someone can grow when provided with security for their family, Sithule saw that her friends in the African community were in need of their own tenants and residents group that addressed their specific needs. That is how Mama Africa was formed.

This inevitably led to the doors of REMA who are set up to support BAME communities and because African women are located throughout the borough, it was decided to have a central base for the group.

It quickly became obvious that the group would offer more than supporting housing and tenancy rights, but help integration and cohesion into communities, to enable better access to the right services, to share their own language and culture and inevitable friendship and support.

Mama Africa is less active now, as many of the women who came as asylum seekers have secured citizenship, and have moved into employment, which is a success too.

As need was identified and consequently met, it became apparent that the children in these families were at risk of becoming disengaged with their own culture, while not fully comfortable in their adopted



country, and needed a place where they belonged.

It was during the preparations for the Rotherham Carnival in 2016, delivered by Open Minds Theatre

Company, that a dance group was formed to perform at the event. The

young people enjoyed the experience so much that funding was secured through the Postcode Lottery

and Young Minds Together was formed.

The group have expanded their artistic repertoire and now include poetry, acting, and music especially drumming. The members of the group include anyone with links to African heritage in some way. They do not have to be direct descendants and they can be friends. It is really open to anyone, and currently there are about 20 young people connected to the group.

It is perhaps still shocking that today many black and mixed race children are still on the receiving end of bullying and discrimination, especially at school by their peers. Young Minds Together creates a space where these young people can feel safe and in some ways free to explore their self expression through creative activity. They can feel at home. They are also equipped with the skills and resilience through

training to become anti-bullying ambassadors.

Not taking Sithule's word for it, I was able to ask one of her daughters, Avumile Sibanda (19), what she enjoys most about being part of Young Minds Together. The overriding sense was the opportunities that are created, to lead sessions and teach dance steps and to trial her own choreography.

Avumile has been effectively teaching since she was 15 years old, to young people between five years as the youngest to 13-year-olds.

A real sense of purpose comes from live performance, with the Diversity Festival offering a confirmed booking every year, with a huge public audience, which really spurs the group on.

Being involved with Young Minds Together, and taking inspiration from her mum, Avumile has the confidence and knowledge to be able to start her own group, should she wish to in the future, and has experience in leading which is an invaluable life skill, which has already seen her taking a role as football coach at her former school.

Avumile is currently studying at university for a degree in Biomedical Science, but assures me there is still time to enjoy dancing.

Ayathola Sibanda (12) enthusiastically enjoys the social side of the group and the range of fantastic opportunities that come about, like performing for the Mayor, going to different places, like the New York Stadium during half-time and dancing in front of thousands of people.



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What Ayathola particularly enjoys is the drumming but she also likes the creative media side of opportunities, like making videos and working on the editing.

I asked if the arts were in her career plan? The answer was not quite what I expected: while not performance, there is a strong sense of design in her ambitions to be an architect.

Last in this interview, but by no means least, is Sinokhule Sibanda, lovingly known as Nono (10). Nono is all about the dance moves. She loves learning new steps and styles and of course the thrill and achievement of performing well to an audience.

She sometimes gets a few butterflies before going on stage, but once she starts to dance Nono loses herself in the movement.

Everyone in the group is encouraged to explore and contribute to the choreography of their routines in a very democratic process and this is something Nono hopes to be able to take forward and teach young people in her own studio. That is after having a successful career as a professional dancer, a film star and world-renowned choreographer so she can go and teach anywhere in the world, taking South African artists to inspire and create global exchanges.

It is a testament to Sithule that her daughters have such drive and ambition, and a real sense of being able to achieve their dreams. I have no doubt that such enthusiasm and zest for life is also shared with the other members of Young Minds Together.

Like any community group, they are dependent on funding to pay for room hire, teachers, and other resources. During the Covid-19 lockdown, the group has not been able to meet every week, and they have secured some support to enable digital meet-ups so they can dance at home but together. They have also been commissioned to create video content for Yorkshire Day and for Black History Month in October.

As mentioned the group have performed each year since their formation five years ago at the Diversity Festival within the Rotherham Show. It is a very public forum with a self selecting audience and provides a real focus for the group's rehearsals and makes the young performers feel very special. The festival is also for and with their families, and an opportunity to showcase their talent which exposes a wider group of people to African-based culture. The feedback is always brilliant.

Under normal circumstances, the group meet at the Unity Centre although they are looking for their own dedicated space with two dance studios, a



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recording suite and an IT room, whether that's on a meanwhile lease or with support.

The group do not charge for their sessions, being very aware that many of their families would not be able to attend if there was a cost, and this way there are no barriers. As a consequence they do rely on funding, donations and sponsorship so do get in touch if you can help them bring such enthusiasm and ambition to other young people.

Young Minds Together can clearly achieve anything they set their sights on!

* If you would like to join in the classes then contact the group through admin@youngminds-together.com or telephone 07799 485588.



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