

# Young doctor's dream comes true: Mid-Illovo youngster is excited about the opportunity to heal the sick, save lives and build his mother a dream home

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To celebrate Christmas Day last week, 26 year-old Dr Nhlanhla Mngadi's family gathered around his humble homestead made up of rondavels, in a poverty-stricken part of Mid-Illovo, on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Although they do have an electronic stove, to save costs they prepared their meal from a fire made on the ground. But he is adamant that this was the last time that Christmas unfolded this way.

Yesterday, Dr Mngadi treated a number of patients at RK Khan Hospital for the very first time as a medical intern, within the family medicine (psychiatry) unit. It was the culmination of a journey that started in 2011, when he and hundreds of other poor South African children left their homes to study medicine in Cuba, a country with a strong focus on health education and disease prevention rather than cure.

Since 1997, 940 KwaZulu-Natal medical students have been enrolled in Cuba, thanks to an agreement signed by former Presidents Nelson Mandela and his Cuban counterpart Fidel Castro. The programme was then pioneered by the then Minister for Health Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. It has since produced 127 doctors; while 438 are still studying in Cuba; and 291 are now completing their studies in South Africa.

Now Dr Mngadi's biggest mission is to build his 64 year-old year-old mother a home that she can be proud of. Commenting on his move to RK Khan Hospital and his first day at work, Dr Mngadi said: "I am extremely excited. I'm over the moon, short of words. I'm also a bit nervous because I'm not sure what to expect. The responsibility is on my shoulders is huge. Working as a doctor is unlike being a student. There's nervousness, which I guess is normal. But we are grateful for this programme. I left in 2011, not knowing what challenges I would face. We've come a long way, now we must go back to our communities and serve them"



Dr Mngadi with

MEC Dhlomo and CEO of RK Khan Hospital Dr Prakash Subban

Mngadi's father passed away when he was eight years old, leaving his mother – a lowly-paid road maintenance worker who is now a pensioner– to raise him and his six siblings. Mngadi is the first to acknowledge that had it not been for the RSA-Cuba Medical Training programme, becoming a doctor for a child from an impoverished home like him would have only been but a pipe dream.

He says his journey has been difficult, and singles out humility, hard work and perseverance as factors that have contributed to his success so far.

"There are lots of challenges along the way, but if you remain headstrong and work hard, you can achieve. We didn't know we would come this far, but here we are now. I am very grateful for the support from our Government, especially in KZN. They supported us a great deal when we were in Cuba. We knew that whenever they came to visit us, it was like being visited by a parent. Our message to those who are still in Cuba is that they must not be afraid. Our Government is there to take care of us. They have shown that they know we are there in Cuba, doing this difficult job."

The future looks bright for Dr Mngadi.

"The situation at home has not been good. But I'm pleased that that has now to come to end. I'm no longer perturbed by it, because I know that things will only get better from here. My biggest wish is to build my mother a house that she can be proud of. A home that has warmth, which will give her dignity. That is the first thing in my mind."

KwaZulu-Natal Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, who accompanied Mngadi to RK Khan Hospital where he is now based, on Monday, describes his story as a heartwarming example of how Government continues to change the lives of young people, their families and communities at large through this programme.

"What we see in the life of Dr Mngadi are the fruits of perseverance from his side. It's a good story to tell about our country. He comes from a poverty-stricken community that nobody knew could produce a doctor. He carries the burden to become a good doctor, but also to eradicate poverty at his home. His mother and sisters must look up to him for a better life. So we are very thankful for this programme because not only has it produced doctors, it has also produced champions who are going to eradicate poverty in their communities. He's one of those doctors

that I've taken under my wing and supported, knowing his background. He's like many others who are out there, also coming from poor families who would not have had a chance to become doctors because he would have needed money to do that. He would have needed Government support to realise his great potential. He is a doctor today because of that Government support. We wish him and many others like him everything of the best."