

Security guard hailed as a hero for rescuing patients during Umphumulo Hospital fire

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A 30 year-old security guard who pulled bed-ridden patients from a burning ward at Umphumulo Hospital (at KwaMaphumulo, Ilembe district), before collapsing due to smoke inhalation, says he would do it all over again if he had to

During the pandemonium Nkanyiso Xaba, who is employed by a private security firm at the hospital, even burst in through a window to rescue a nurse and a patient who were trapped in one the smoke-filled TB ward.

His heroics have earned him accolades from KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo.

It all started when a mental healthcare patient reportedly started a fire in the psychiatric seclusion ward late on Tuesday afternoon. At the time, there were 16 other patients next door in the male medical ward, and two in the TB male ward.

Xaba says moments earlier he had searched the mentally-disturbed patient to ensure he had no dangerous items in his possession, before leaving him in the seclusion ward.



The heroic

Nkanyiso Xaba with CEO of Stanger Hospital Dr Noxolo Vabaza

But a while later, while taking a walk to the main gate, Xaba looked back and noticed clouds of smoke emerging from the building he had just left.

He rushed to the scene and found nurses, doctors, general orderlies trying to remove patients while scrambling to douse the fire, which had turned into a huge blaze.

Speaking from hospital, Xaba said: *“I noticed that the fire was spreading from the seclusion ward to the male general and TB wards. What became uppermost in my mind was the fact that there were patients on hospital beds who couldn’t walk on their own, so I had to pull them out. I told those who could walk on their own to go outside because the ward was on fire.”*

Due to fire and smoke, the TB ward - which had a nurse and a patient inside - had become inaccessible through the front door. He burst in through the back window to rescue enrolled nursing assistant Fikile Xulu, who was also trying to remove the patient. With the help of security colleagues, nurses and other staff members, the door was forced open and Xaba emerged with both of them.

"I don't even know how many patients I pulled out because everything happened so quickly," he says.

However, the problem started for Xaba when he went to fetch the last patient. *"I pulled out the bed with the patient, but when I got out there was just too much smoke. My nose was blocked, and I couldn't breathe through my mouth. That's when I collapsed,"* Xaba said. He was then rushed to the casualty ward, where he received medical attention before being transferred to Stanger Hospital.

The mentally-disturbed patient was taken to King Dinuzulu Hospital, while nursing staff were sent to the casualty unit for screening, and later received counselling.

The smoke inhalation took a toll on Xaba. For some time, he remained dazed and confused. His condition started improving yesterday, although he was still coughing intermittently.

Xaba, whose childhood hopes of becoming a police officer were thwarted by the poverty at his home, has been a security officer for the past seven years. He says he is proud of what he did on Tuesday.

"I think I displayed courage. I'm proud of what I did. I would not hesitate to do it again to save lives. If it was another person, I don't know if they would have done it."

He has not lost hope of one day becoming a police officer.

MEC Dhlomo was moved by what Xaba and other staff members did. *"What this young man has done is unbelievable... Literally putting his life on the line like that to save lives! He helped us avoid a disaster. That is heroism. Our Honourable President Mr Cyril Ramaphosa always encourages the spirit of #ThumaMina, to say that we should take the initiative...put our country first, and do things that will benefit others. What Xaba did on Tuesday is the embodiment of exactly that. We are extremely proud of him, as well as everybody else who helped out during this emergency."*

Damage to the wards is still being assessed, and contingency plans have been put in place to ensure that work that is normally conducted at the affected areas continues.