

## Covid conquerors

# Made, not broken, by lockdown

The pandemic was tough, but Generation Next proved even tougher

By KYLE ZEEMAN

For nearly two years, SA was locked down to try to contain the spread of the coronavirus, forever changing the way that youth see the world, brands and each other.

"It hit like a bomb and left us in a fever dream. The world that appeared so invincible was suddenly so vulnerable," says 17-year-old Dirhil Mulumba.

The pandemic was like something out of a Hollywood blockbuster, with 21-year-old Mbali Khumalo describing the anxiety she felt as the once busy streets grew quiet.

"I remember looking out the window at the street below, a major road and used all hours of the day, and thinking that this is what a post-apocalypse movie must feel like. I knew the world would never be the same and it frightened me."

For others, lockdown provided a brief reprieve from discrimination.

"I forgot, as a gay person, how homophobic people can be. I didn't have to deal with that during the lockdown, but when I returned to school I had no option but to adapt," says Mulumba.

He will always remember lockdown as the time he found acceptance.

"I was dealing with a lot of issues

during lockdown and I felt like no-one in my family understood me, so I turned to pages online. I met a lot of friends there who understood me and helped me a lot. I found a community."

It was also a time of mourning.

Sixteen-year-old Lenny Makafula lost family members to the virus and says it made him appreciate the value of life.

"It changed a lot in my life. I suddenly became more aware of my surroundings, to stay healthy and not get infected by the disease."

Makafula says his self-esteem also took a knock when he started gaining weight. To cope, he threw himself into making music and exercising.

Fourteen-year-old Nick Favit says he started feeling sadder as time went on, so turned to funny and entertaining content on social media.

"I used to be a little antisocial and I wanted to be by myself a lot. I would just lie on my bed, sleep all day or listen to music. I would watch hilarious videos to distract myself and keep me company."

While TikTok and YouTube were an escape for Generation Next during lockdown, many admitted to missing human interaction.

Fifteen-year-old Naseeha Maharaj says the pandemic revealed how some friendships were strictly face-to-face, which became impossible to maintain.

Favit says he missed spending time with his friends, but found being locked up together strengthened his relationship with his family.

"My brother and I would ride our bicycles together every day. It was one of the activities I looked forward to and really miss now that lockdown is over."



**Dirhil Mulumba**



**Naseeha Maharaj**



**Nick Favit**

Recognising the impact of the pandemic on the youth and education, veteran educator Shaun Fuchs created the Centennial Schools in Sunninghill, Joburg.

"The school was born out of lockdown and the world it changed. I have been in education for more than 30 years and saw how the lockdown in early 2020 changed teaching and learning. State schools did not cope at all."

His school, which provides classes from grade 7 to 9, includes several innovations familiar to Generation Next, including esports, wellness activities and daily mental health check-ins.

"This generation is the most digitally literate ever. They are content creators. We need to take that content and skills they learnt, and adapt it to learning."

Fuchs says every student he interviewed was comfortable with gaming, a popular pastime during lockdown, and so the school not only added esports to the curriculum but also brought games into lessons.

One example of this was building a Minecraft world around a lesson and including learning material in the environment.

He says the results have been

astounding, with students showing a dramatic and marked improvement in understanding when taught on a platform Generation Next is most comfortable with.

Fuchs noted the ravaging effect of Covid on mental health and says the school puts a major focus on mental and physical wellness.

"In all my years of teaching, I have never seen students so anxious and so many suffering from depression. This generation is in such a difficult situation. Their parents have been retrenched, some have lost family members to the pandemic, and all of them have experienced the isolation of lockdown. They have not seen their friends' faces for nearly two years. Think what subconscious psychological and emotional damage this has done."

The school has a chill zone which allows students a safe space to escape to for 15 minutes, even during lessons, to have a mental timeout. It also teaches Pilates and yoga as a way to cope with stress and re-centre.

Students are encouraged to check in with teachers regularly and undergo a wellness exercise on the "It's OK" mobile app at the start



**Veteran educator Shaun Fuchs created the Centennial Schools in Sunninghill, Johannesburg.**

of every day to analyse their moods.

All students who want to take part in esports need to have booked a physical fitness activity, driving home the importance of exercise and physical wellness in overall development.

Fuchs also notes the importance of human interaction in a world that has become increasingly digital, and the need to couple this with a safe space to engage in.

He says the most difficult part of implementing such changes was resistance from some parents who still thought their children needed to be taught the way they were before the pandemic struck. From a brand perspective, as Generation Next turns increasingly online, it's the brands that adapt the best and quickest that are succeeding.

"From a communications point of view, one of the biggest trends we saw was the proliferation of the two-screen culture. People are on their phones while watching Netflix, or moving seamlessly between social media and other platforms," says Kevin Welman, ByDesign communications director.

"The brands that are winning in this new digital age are those that can integrate the two-screen culture most successfully, and adapt the quickest to new consumer needs."

Welman also stresses the importance of trust for Generation Next. "The trust factor has changed the way we view information sources. We've seen direct communication emerge as trusted sources of information, rather than mass communication platforms."

For Mulumba and millions of others in Generation Next, life has changed forever. The lockdown brought pain, heartache and loneliness, but also acceptance, reflection and a chance to start again. "When you go on lockdown, you miss your friends and when everything goes back to normal, you realise that you actually missed the lockdown. It made you who you are, and you found an honest part of yourself that perhaps you never knew was there."

They realise they were not broken by the lockdown, but made by it.