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Exclusive Interview with
Ntaba Phili from NAPD

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Ntaba Phili

by Stefan Vos

**Entrepreneur
By
Design**

Our cover this month features Ntaba Phili, the Managing Director of NAPD Holdings (Pty) Ltd, a wholly black-owned property and investment holding company that invests, develops and manages premier business properties. Ntaba is generous with the knowledge and wisdom he has gained through his experiences in both business and life and there is much to be gleaned from this hard-working and driven man's story.

We asked Ntaba to tell us something about his background and childhood, which, as it turned out, played a massive role in shaping who he is today:

“I grew up in the progressive township of Clermont in KwaZulu-Natal as a middle child in a large family of eight children. My father was a self-made businessman and all the children had to work in the business after school and during school holidays, on top of house chores every morning before school”. Ntaba had to sweep the yard and wash the cars every morning before getting ready for school, which meant waking up at 6am. “Although this was undoubtedly a frustrating experiencing while growing up, it has been a highly influential part of my life in terms of self-discipline”.



This disciplined lifestyle and strong work ethic was reinforced when Ntaba went to boarding school at St Francis' College in Mariannahill where he performed morning duties after attending mass at 5:30am. “Needless to say, I could not wait to get out of high school and go to 'varsity.

By then I had decided that I would like to go as far from home as possible, so the University of Cape Town was a natural choice for me. This was against my father's wishes to study at the University of Natal and stay at home, as I knew this meant I would have to work at the shop after school and on holidays”.

Ntaba continues: “There are a number of important influences that shaped my childhood years. There were a number of role models that I

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interacted with, ranging from church ministers and businessmen to tradesmen that visited my father's business.



Ntaba shares some life lessons gained from a difficult time: “I find that I am very cautious in my dealings, as I know that any good fortune can quickly be whittled away by misfortune or reckless behavior. This comes from experiencing the slow decline of my father’s business during the early 90’s and its eventual fall into bankruptcy, an experience that stays with me even today. However, this had both negative and positive outcomes. The upside is that this period offered us a chance to become close as a family unit, especially for us children who gained a father we never knew before, as he had previously spent all his time in the business.

This was an especially difficult period in his life as he was in his second year at university, without a bursary: “I was faced with the real possibility of not being able to return to school, as there was no money for tuition, let alone the flight to Cape Town. After scraping through and finding my way back to school, I was blessed with a bursary from Caltex that carried me for the rest of my studies, and also provided assured employment on graduation”.

The discipline in the home from a young age taught me to be self-disciplined as an adult, and is a great source of strength in business. Having been exposed to business at a young age has also played a significant role in preparing me for running a business later in life”.

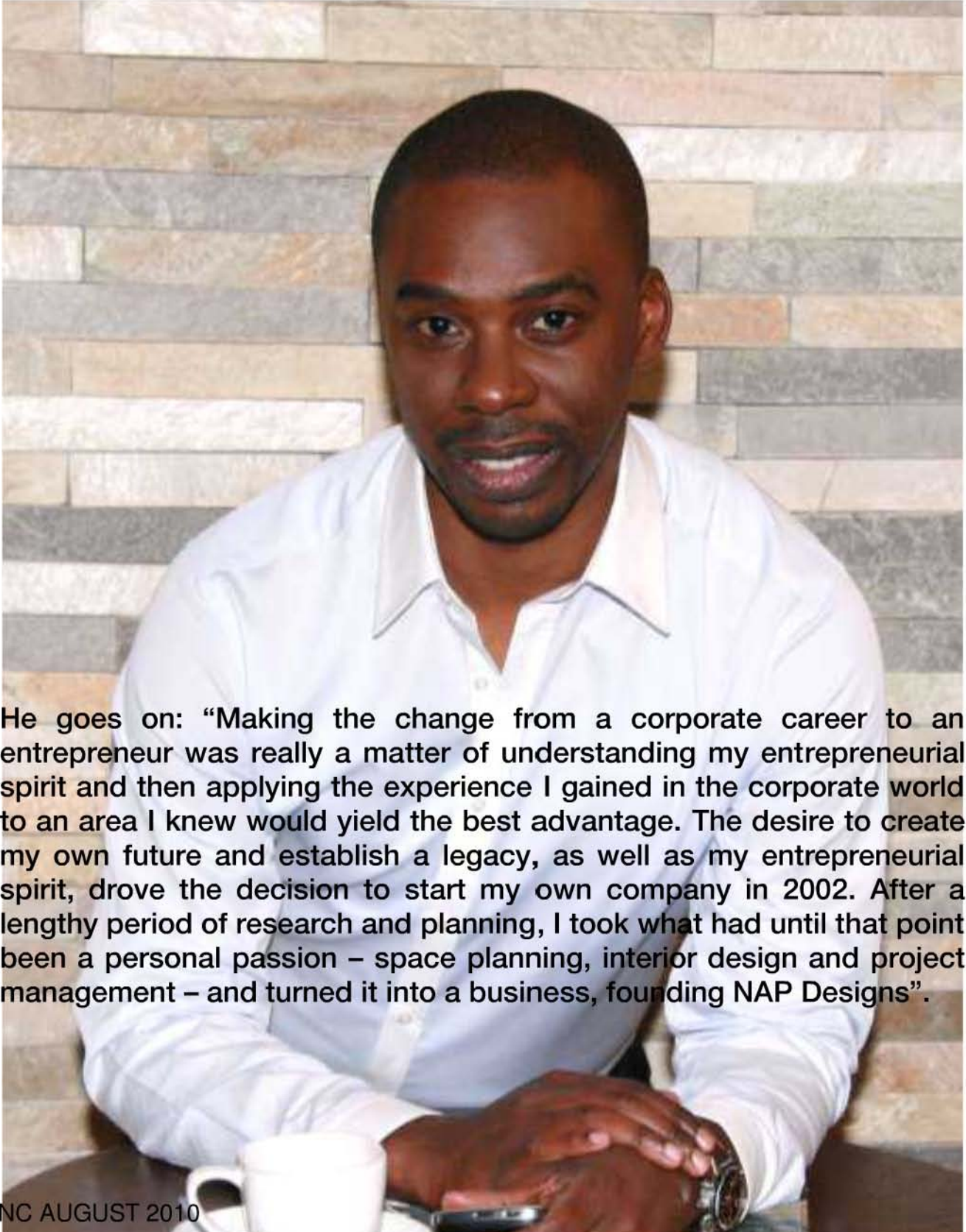
In terms of what inspired him to become an entrepreneur, Ntaba shares: “Having grown up in an entrepreneurial family, the move into business has seen me face an unquenchable thirst to run my own business by taking NAPD Holdings to its current position, having built a solid platform with our founding company NAP Designs”. He shares something of the journey that culminated in him founding his own business: “I entered the property industry after spending ten years in the corporate environment, working as an executive in a variety of disciplines including sales, marketing, customer services, business development, and policy and customer relationship management.



Having initially pursued a career in the sciences with Caltex Oil (after graduating from the University of Cape Town with a BSc in Chemistry), I realised what I really wanted to do was to interact with people a lot more. From Caltex I joined Unilever for two years, undertaking industrial marketing in the chemical industry. “He then moved to

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Eskom, where he first worked for advisory services and then for the pricing and policy division. “From Eskom, I joined Transnet, focusing on marketing, business development and customer service once again. I was instrumental in setting up a call centre as well as a Customer Relationship Management System for the organisation”.



He goes on: “Making the change from a corporate career to an entrepreneur was really a matter of understanding my entrepreneurial spirit and then applying the experience I gained in the corporate world to an area I knew would yield the best advantage. The desire to create my own future and establish a legacy, as well as my entrepreneurial spirit, drove the decision to start my own company in 2002. After a lengthy period of research and planning, I took what had until that point been a personal passion – space planning, interior design and project management – and turned it into a business, founding NAP Designs”.

We asked Ntaba about some of the accomplishments of which he is most proud: “Leaving my secure job after ten years, and starting my own business at the age of thirty-three, and eventually celebrating a successful six years in business with NAP Designs, and diversifying our business through NAPD Holdings into a property and investments holdings company.

Since the formation of NAP Designs, the group has continued to evolve in the property sector. Building on the success of the flagship operation, I formed NAPD Holdings (Pty) Ltd, a wholly black-owned property investment and development company that contains NAP Designs (Pty) Ltd, NAP Developments (Pty) Ltd. and NAP Investments (Pty) Ltd. that focus on property investment and development, as well as strategic investments in established businesses where the group is able to add real value, respectively.

I deliberately wanted to do it this way, choosing to get involved and be hands-on in order to learn quickly in an industry I knew little of. It was the perfect opportunity for me to cut my teeth in the full spectrum of the property chain by starting from the bottom and building up the company organically”.

Ntaba speaks about what he finds most uplifting about being a successful businessperson:

“It gives me the feeling of being in charge of my destiny. As I am turning forty this month, I couldn’t think of a better place to be than where I am. This is the best time to plan and chart a new path for my career and my adult life. As you know, they say life begins at ‘forty’.”

“I find my work to be uplifting and satisfying as I am living my dream of marrying the business and creative elements of my work. This way I get to apply business strategy in the development and growth of businesses as well as contribute to creating corporate/ client value.

I also enjoy helping to develop other BEE organizations by disseminating skills. Through a hands-on approach and my procurement background, I seek to add value to the broader industry through partnerships with nascent organisations, in the hope that they’ll develop into fully-fledged players in the field.

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Recently I have partnered with Shanduka Black Umbrellas to participate in their mentorship program, which seeks to provide business support for young emerging businesses”.

Ntaba graciously offers the following advice for other entrepreneurs:

1. Be visionary in your thinking, and realistic in your actions. Life rewards action, dreams alone won't get you there as the world cares little for thoughts without actions.
2. Allow yourself to dream, but balance this by being practical at all times.
3. Always aim to under-promise and over-deliver to your clients.
4. Do what counts first, as there are no prizes for ploughing a straight furrow, if the crops don't come up.
5. Honouring one's promises is the first rule of winning people over.
6. Always start with the end result in mind.
7. Create your own experience in whatever you choose to do.
8. Work hard, and focus on your abilities and strengths, not your disabilities and weaknesses.
9. Realise that failures are simply lessons you require to prevent you from making bigger mistake in the future.

We wish Ntaba every success in all his future endeavours. He is an inspiration and role model to whom we can all aspire.

