

From Cape Flats childhood to a well-chartered life of uplifting youth through sports

 By Leigh Andrews, issued by SAICA

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Nathaniel Japhta grew up in the Cape Flats, a life many chartered accountants [CAs(SA)] just can't imagine. He has first-hand experience with prevalent gang culture and witnessing drug abuse, explaining: "I saw friends and family with more talent than I had go to prison for life, or face no option but a life of drug dealing. I was held at gunpoint for my watch on my way to write my matric final exams. It's just one of the many experiences I had to endure and push through." Here's what inspired him to push through and help the next generation get on the safe track to a brighter future.



Nathaniel Japhta

Starting life in the Cape Flats, it was a normal occurrence for police to raid the house at 3am on a weekday. "It's difficult to become anything more than what you see and experience daily, but that's the reality for many South African kids."

In addition, many kids living on the Cape Flats are in homes with little hope. Nathaniel says: "When I drive there over a weekend, I see so many five- and six-year-olds just roaming the streets unsupervised. Many parents had to grow up very fast, help provide in their home very young, and just weren't ready to play that role."

What they *do* want to play is sport, but many like Nathaniel attended schools that offer just one sport – athletics, for one month out of the year. Nathaniel's own father wasn't allowed to play rugby for his country of birth during apartheid, despite his talents. Rugby taught his dad about working towards a common goal as a team and keeping each other accountable, and it's fascinating how that culture started filtering into the home.

So while his dad didn't get the opportunities he deserved, that's what sparked Nathaniel to start Pro-266, a sport management organisation based in Cape Town South, which doesn't allow a child keen to pursue a dream slip through the cracks. Without his own father's discipline and faith, Nathaniel admits he could likely have become a statistic. While they didn't have much money, his parents were present, and that made all the difference.

Big city culture shock

But it was still a rocky start. For example, as his under-resourced school wasn't equipped to offer a 'pure maths' stream, so Nathaniel was on the back foot and 'somehow scraped into' the BCom programme. Once on the same playing field as his peers, however, he performed well enough to qualify for the accounting programme's CA(SA) stream – a degree he didn't qualify for from the offset.

The escape from the Cape Flats to university-centric Stellenbosch for his tertiary studies, and later move to Johannesburg to complete his articles, was a culture shock. Nathaniel saw kids at university with their own cars, while his own parents didn't own a car, and had been working hard for years. But the biggest shock of all was meeting ambitious young people who had big dreams. Becoming a bookkeeper or receptionist were major achievements where he's from – "we're known for working in construction and wearing blue overalls."

Nathaniel's new peers had different plans, which rubbed off on him. Yet while he received a small basketball scholarship from Stellenbosch University, it took him years to pay off his student debt. His family also needed help, so he started his articles facing hundreds of thousands of rands' worth of debt. But he worked through it. Today, Nathaniel is co-owner of EasyLife Kitchens Kenilworth, with his wife Stacy his partner in business and in life, as well as director of an advisory

business. He calls his faith the foundation for all his success.

The not-so-sweet truth of life in the C-suite

Nathaniel says while entrepreneurship and CEO titles sound glamorous, they're far from it. It's a constant slog and these roles expose how much you really can *vasbyt*. There's little balance in the beginning, and too many 'S-words': Suffering and sacrifice, followed by lots of patience.

But Nathaniel started with very little, so feels he has very little to lose. He says that's one of the benefits of coming from the Cape Flats. "So give it your all, find the right people to grow it and, in time, you will steadily progress forward, though sometimes you need to move backwards and adjust the sails."

The CA(SA) journey also teaches you skills that set you apart from other entrepreneurs, as many of the skills come in handy before you realise it. For Nathaniel, it was learning about the financial statements and functioning board required for a sports club to get funding from government institutions. He also wrote the international basketball agents exam and found it a breeze, due to his studying skills and general business acumen already acquired.

"But having a scary vision such as creating global opportunities for hard-working young people can't be bright to life alone. I'm not afraid to ask for help, because nothing significant is done alone."

Sport is the carrot

That business acumen, in turn, comes very handy today. In addition to his day job, Nathaniel's involved in the Heideveld Basketball Club, president of the Cape Town Basketball Association, established the Pro Basket Agency, leads a boutique talent and finance consultancy, and serves as director of Pro Business Advisory, while also running the Pro-226 basketball and educational clinic.

While Nathaniel's core agenda is education, he loves instilling a love of sport in others as he quickly realised that "sport is the carrot that gets young people in the door for the education to happen."



By association, Nathaniel's an advocate for addressing issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality through education in the greater community, and believes that education and sport go hand-in-hand.

When he first met kids who grew up in the suburbs, Nathaniel realised everyone faces their own challenges. That's why it's one of Pro-226's goals to bring together children from different backgrounds and cultures, to break barriers. Nathaniel believes everyone has some sort of privilege, and it's important to raise leaders who realise they have influence and can affect positive change in their circles.

He says, "Our goal is to grow our initiative by partnering with other CAs and corporates in South Africa to change the game for our kids. We want to create more pockets of excellence, just like the one in Heideveld that produces academics, national basketball players and coaches."

Putting privilege into perspective

That's crucial, as the 2018 World Inequality Report lists South Africa as one of the most unequal countries in the world when it comes to income, due to the historical deep-rooted exclusions of apartheid, which created structural bottlenecks in addressing poverty, inequality and unemployment.

Without prioritising the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Nathaniel warns we'll run out of resources. "We should be thinking circular. The inequality in South Africa is a ticking time bomb and CEOs can no longer ignore investing in agendas like education, youth, women and children initiatives, as neglecting these will affect us all. You can build the biggest wall, but you're forced to drive out, once in a while. We have to deal with the problems," he clarifies.



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Nathaniel knows young people who would be satisfied with becoming a driver or gardener, yet they are capable of becoming teachers or lawyers. It's because they are desperate, and didn't have a good start in life. Luckily, that's not the end of their story – anything but. Pro-226 is teaching them to dream, understand who they are and give everything, just like when they play a match, in their career and academics.

The clinic also effectively opens up the world to its attendees, as they want to give more youth cultural and academic experiences across the globe. This is linked to a scholarship fund, as well as their partner sports and tertiary academy in Lyon, France founded by multiple NBA champion, Tony Parker. There are also plans to build a professional education and basketball academy, like Parker's Adequat Academy, in Cape Town in the near future.

Ex-NBA David Rivers has also opened up the US and European basketball arena for the South African children, so if a child wants to play competitively while going to school or studying abroad, Pro-226 makes it happen. Best of all? Attendees are guaranteed a job at the end of their studies.



Messages that change mindsets

Nathaniel concludes: "We are a nation of *Ubuntu*, but many struggle to survive, let alone thrive. Sometimes people just need someone to believe in them, and that costs very little. There are so many unsung heroes out there doing great work and each little bit ultimately adds to the collective making a significant impact on South Africa."

A child seeing an older version of themselves, coming from the same neighbourhood yet dressed in a suit or holding hands with his wife – these are big messages that change mindsets.

Nathaniel has met many young CA(SA)s with great ideas prompted by witnessing desperate situations who struggle to start. He's also met those who wish they had started earlier and done more, instead of slaving away in a corner until age 65.

“So no matter how big or small that societal problem you'd like to address, act. If it's too scary to tackle alone, find the right people to journey with you. Your skills as a CA(SA) are scarce and many NGOs, schools and community initiatives are falling short as they lack your skills,” says Nathaniel.

See how Pro-266 is changing lives [here](#). For more information about how you too can help Pro-266 make a difference, email info@pro226africa.co.za

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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