

Setting sail for a better future

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South Africans who live near the coast can enjoy swimming, surfing, fishing and sailing at any time. For the past decade the non-profit Izivunguvungu-MSC Foundation for Youth has ensured that young people from the Western Cape's disadvantaged communities can enjoy those activities too.



Students at the Izivunguvungu sailing school learn life skills as well as the boating essentials.

Working with the South African Navy (SAN) and the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), Izivunguvungu (isiZulu, meaning "a sudden strong wind") gives youngsters the opportunity to learn about sailing, boatbuilding, and they also receive education about health, literacy, and recycling and caring for the environment.

Based in Simon's Town, the Izivungu school enrolls students between the ages of 11 and 18. There are currently 100 attending the school, with an average of 20 students, from schools servicing informal settlements including Red Hill and Ocean View, sailing on a daily basis.

Lessons take place in the afternoons, and only once children have learnt how to swim. Promising students are taken on as instructors once they complete their training - however, at the moment there are funds enough for just two instructors.

Students are not only taught the basics, but are also instructed in competitive sailing, boat building and repair, and navigation. Boats in all conditions are donated to the school, and the students learn how to get them seaworthy again before taking them out to sea.

They also learn mathematics and physics, important subjects in the nautical sector. In addition, the school transports the students to the Simon's Town dockyards and provides each one with a hearty meal after their sailing exercises.

Besides their maritime education, Izivungu students are encouraged to fish in False Bay and participate in outdoor activities such as rock climbing and mountaineering.

On the cultural side, the SAN Band supports the Izivunguvungu Music Project, which teaches brass and percussion skills to the musically inclined, who then get the chance to perform with the navy band during the annual SAN Festival.

Developing their maritime skills

The Izivunguvungu-MSF Foundation for Youth, in conjunction with the SAN Festival, is responsible for organising the largest developmental regatta in South Africa. Here, more than 50 development sailors compete in dinghies supplied by the SAN.

Every Sunday, students take each other on in bosun dinghies, which look like small yachts and can carry a crew of up to four people. The 14-footers are fast enough to take part in competitions, and stable enough for beginners to handle. At the end of each competition season, the best teams are chosen to compete in local and national regattas and races.

In 2011, seven students undertook the trip of their lives when they competed in the annual Cape to Rio Yacht race. The crew steered their yacht, Spirit of Izivunguvungu, into a credible seventh place out of 16 starters. The 5 343 km race took 20 days to complete.

Speaking just before the race got underway, Izivunguvungu skipper Kader Williams expressed his pride in his young crew. "These are guys that have been on the back of a police van but changed their lives for the better," he said.

Like the rest of the team, the 31-year-old Williams started off as a young student and worked his way up through the Isivungu ranks.

Izivungu graduate Asenathi Jim (19), also a 2011 Cape to Rio crewman, is currently campaigning for a spot in Team SA for the 2012 Olympics.

With the experienced Roger Hudson, Jim is part of a two-man team that has been preparing for the Olympics since 2009. The duo is in Barcelona for the 470 World Championships, which take place from 10 to 19 May.

Giving youngsters a chance

Izivunguvungu was started in 2001 by triple Olympian, former world sailing champion and qualified teacher Ian Ainslie, since 2004 a member of the South African America's Cup entrant Team Shosholozu. Ainslie has been a keen sailor since the age of 13, and today is recognised as one of the country's most accomplished helmsmen.

The foundation has had a rewarding relationship with the SAN since its inception, and it is with their help and that of the Mediterranean Shipping Company that it can continue to do fulfil its mission.

The navy provides the premises, which include an office building, recreational and educational space, a classroom, a clothing storeroom, and a kitchen and dining room. The navy has also given the school access to manpower for specialised teaching, vessels and emergency equipment.

The Mediterranean Shipping Company continues to fund the initiative, and their support covers the salaries, food, competitive clothing, transport and petrol, and building maintenance. The MSC has also donated the keelboat Donna Mia Always, and helps promising students out with job opportunities.