

## 'The choice began with a needle and thread' - Zaid Philander

As Youth Month draws to a close, we interview activist and entrepreneur Zaid Philander on his social enterprise [I Scream & Red](#). Philander reveals the origin story behind the unusual name of his planet friendly textile company, the challenges he's faced along the way, as well as how he overcame them.

 By Sindy Peters 28 Jun 2016



### **Who is Zaid Philander?**

Zaid is a social activist, teacher and entrepreneur. He designs bags made from upcycled materials whilst empowering physically disabled residents from disadvantaged communities in Cape Town. We believe in giving them the opportunity to create I Scream & Red products within their homes. This model enables people to cascade the learning, thus empowering other members of their communities to start businesses of their own. He is a passionate social and environmental activist who teaches art and sewing to kids, whilst running a successful eco-friendly social enterprise in townships across Cape Town.

As a young boy, I was told that sewing is for the opposite sex and that I do not fit the profile. Yet, against a odds (my length, my strength and apparently my gender), I accomplished what I wanted - to sew. Today, I train people with disabilities to sew these planet-friendly items, as I can relate to how society puts limitation on you. My task is now not to prove them wrong, but to inspire others to do whatever they believe they want to achieve. For me, the choice began with a needle and thread.

### **I Scream & Red - that's an unusual name. Could you elaborate on its origin story?**

As a kid, I never enjoyed ice cream. In fact, I always opted for something else like chips, where my sibling instead would be chowing down their cones with frozen cream that made no sense to me! At the same time my favourite colour has always been red.

When I started this initiative, not really knowing what to call it, there was a disappointing incident where one of my first makers was burgled in his shack and the perpetrators involved took our sewing machines and beat him up. This was very upsetting, and for a long time I had to sit back and ask myself if I am really prepared for this kind of social work that can risk the lives of the people involved. I continued the work nonetheless, and held my head high. I kept the name, which was partly also due to someone dear to me who loved ice cream. So the name was to remind me of the bad things that could happen (being ice cream - something that I never enjoyed), and to remind me of the good things (red - being my favourite colour).

It was only until much later that Ice Cream & Red changed to I Scream & Red because of domain name availability!

**■ *What were some of the challenges you faced in getting I Scream & Red off the ground, and how did you overcome them?***

Well, as you can imagine, I had a lot of resistance from my elders who believed that the only careers one should pursue to better our lives should be that of a lawyer or a doctor. This challenge was very demotivating for me as a child who wanted to pursue a career in the creative industry, but I managed to see further than that through books and art. After my walks from high school, I would save R2,50 by walking from the city to home (instead of taking a minibus) and save the money up at the end of the week where I would dive into a reject fabric bundle to make my next item, which were often outfits inspired by the legends. The feeling of achieving to create something that was functional, beautiful and allowed me to escape to a place that I felt empowered, is what kept me strong-headed and motivated.

I think a major challenge for me was that my physical ability did not allow me to sew, being too short as a kid but soon after, I overcame that by using a contraption made from a crutch and a hosepipe that had me sewing using my elbow. This drive, I believe, is the simplicity of wanting to make it happen for myself. So making a plan and having the will to continue is the solution to almost any problem.

Other than that, I would say being the weirdo kid that made his own little fabric malfunctions was difficult. It was difficult because it made me an easy target to be ridiculed. It also made it difficult as I was a 90s kid, the only people who were sewing around me were female factory workers or grannies. So I guess the challenge was having courage for my own convictions and believing what I made was great... and let's be honest, when you're creating clothing at such a young age, some of the items were really not that pretty.

**■ *Is there enough support for youth development and entrepreneurship in SA? Where can we improve, and who still needs to come to the party?***

Gosh, where to start... I think with a new South Africa, and a legacy of wealth that is still maintained by particular parties, it makes it difficult, as the opportunities for informal entrepreneurs to exist simply does not allow them to go up against the trust fund kids who can pay their way through challenges (especially when it comes to growing their businesses). But, I prefer to not discuss politics and history, as I believe we all possess the power to change things in the world we want to see.

I think there should be better placement for rising and emerging entrepreneurs that are making social changes. There are tons of government subsidies; however, the training and education out there for new entrepreneurs in business to acquire these kind of funds is not very accessible. We need more 'middle-men' who stand between the intensive administration challenges set up by corporates and governing bodies and emerging entrepreneurs and creatives that do the work we do because we want to see a change in the world.

Other than that, I think science parks, business incubators and corporates that can provide effective support for growing firms need to be established and made more accessible without them wanting the result of financial gain.

### ▣ ***What achievements are you most proud of to date?***

To be honest, the best achievements are not what one would consider a milestone. The awards, features and blurbs are great and a wonderful pat on the shoulder, but the truth is that the best achievement we've ever accomplished is what we do every day. The idea of being able to empower someone who has been schooled by society to believe that they have a limitation is a gift in itself - that can never be replaced by anything greater.



### ▣ ***What does Youth Month mean for you?***

Youth means change. It means cultivating, uniting, and optimism; for the people that are the real changemakers of this world are the crazies that are willing enough to see it through.

### ▣ ***What's next on the cards for Zaid Philander and I Scream & Red?***

There are a few great things happening in the pipeline that may be too early to mention, but we are currently fundraising in order to develop a Sewing Centre to get more disabled makers on board, and to use as a collective space for developing designers that need their items made at a sample level - a centre for true incubation of young designers and changemakers.

We're also focusing on growing our footprint better here in South Africa, which means opening up more spaces across SA and for the people of SA. How can we claim to be a South African-made product if we are not providing our services to South Africa.

## ABOUT SINDY PETERS

Sindy Peters (@sindy\_hullaba\_lou) is a group editor at Bizcommunity.com on the Construction & Engineering, Energy & Mining, and Property portals. She can be reached at [sindy@bizcommunity.com](mailto:sindy@bizcommunity.com).  
View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>