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thyssenkrupp teams up with The Red Wings Project to spread Mandela Day goodwill

The education of countless disadvantaged young girls in South Africa is being compromised due to high absenteeism from school; the lack of access to and unaffordability of sanitary pads result in many girls missing one week of school every month.

thyssenkrupp Industrial Solutions South Africa has always thrown its full weight behind Mandela Day and employees are encouraged to give of their time to a humanitarian cause. *"The dire situation of these girls is near and dear to the hearts of women as we can all relate to this problem,"* says Kgothatso Ntsie who heads up Marketing and Communications at thyssenkrupp. *"So, in honour of Mandela Day 2018, we supported The Red Wings Project, an admirable initiative that collects and distributes sanitary pads to underprivileged girls."*

thyssenkrupp employees embraced the initiative and gave generously. *"We were pleasantly surprised to see so much support from our male staff,"* continues Kgothatso. *"Maria Sorota, a graduate in our Marketing and Communications division, was instrumental in raising the funds which we used to purchase 280 packs of sanitary pads."*

The Red Wings Project was founded by Olwethu Leshabane at the end of 2013. This young mother of three and Brand SA Ambassador, is a leading advocate of female sanitation. It all started when Olwethu and her husband were supporting a needy family in Klipfontein, assisting a grandmother who takes care of eight grandchildren. One of the grandchildren was caught stealing underwear off the neighbour's washing line. The young girl was menstruating and ran out of clean underwear. She did not know what was happening to her body and was afraid to speak to her grandmother.

This incident opened Olwethu's eyes to this problem and she wanted to engage with the community to find out more. Olwethu learnt that, out of desperation and unable to afford sanitary pads, girls in impoverished communities are attempting to make their own sanitary pads using socks and even inserting leaves inside the socks.

Sanitary pads cost the same as a bag of mealie meal and hunger overrides all else. Many girls also do not understand what is happening to their bodies and often feel ashamed and are too scared to discuss it with their parents or an adult.

So the Red Wings Project was born and, in her true entrepreneurial spirit, Olwethu began the collection and distribution of sanitary pads, first in Gauteng, Cape Town, and later spreading to Limpopo. Her dream is to eventually reach all the country's provinces.

But Olwethu points out that the problem is much wider than the lack of sanitary pads. *"Due to insufficient toilet facilities in schools and communities young girls do not have access to hygienic amenities."* In 2016, Olwethu established a toilet clean-up campaign which is seeing her lobbying engineering companies and related industries to assist with cleaning, refurbishing and repairing of toilets at needy communities and schools.

Passionate about helping women to lead a healthy and fulfilling life, Olwethu goes yet another step further, teaching women to build their own pit latrines. According to Olwethu, this is already being done in Uganda and Zambia where women even manufacture their own bricks. Focused on equipping women to help themselves, Olwethu aims to have the Women and Water initiative up and running before the end of the year. *"This is a much needed end-to end approach, from building ventilated pit toilets to menstruation changing areas and wash basins as well as maintenance and the safe and correct use of chemicals,"* she explains.

The Women and Water initiative teaches women to use resources in their area such as soil to build the necessary facilities. *"In a pay-it-forward approach, we train two people who in turn train eight people in their communities and then they build together."* Receiving valuable support from her mother inlaw who is based in Polokwane, Olwethu says that women have historically utilised their knowledge to build their own houses., why not their own toilets? Young UCT graduates, from engineers to quantity surveyors, are also working together pooling their resources to assist in the building and repairing of toilets.

Seeing the bigger picture, Olwethu is also a strong advocate of health education and conducts talks about menstruation and hygiene at schools. Teachers are reporting that once boys learn about menstruation, they show a great deal of compassion to the women in their lives. It is all about education and it's not just a 'girl or woman thing'. Boys also need to be informed.

Insufficient resources and lack of funds hamper the distribution of sanitary pads. *“Corporates usually donate once-off and while we are extremely appreciative of any support, the initiative requires sustainable long-term assistance to help those in need,”* states Olwethu.

On 19 July 2018, Kgothatso and Maria handed over the sanitary pads to Olwethu on behalf of thyssenkrupp employees. *“I am so grateful and honoured that thyssenkrupp has embraced this project,”* says Olwethu. *“Thank you Kgothatso and Maria for driving this initiative. Your timing could not be more perfect with Women’s Month in August. We remain dedicated to resolving this crippling problem in our country.”*

Olwethu’s story is proof of the vast difference one person can make in a community. She concludes with a sage message, *“People may not understand the plight of others but you must always be open to learning and lending a helping hand. If you know better, you do better.”*

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