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## Young visionary transforms personal struggles into a thriving artistic endeavour



Activism Productions director Zolani Balekwa.

Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

At the age of 19, Zolani Balekwa turned his personal challenges into a powerful source of inspiration, establishing his own production house, Activism Productions. As a product of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) community engagement video training programme, Stepping Stone, Balekwa's journey in the arts is a testament to resilience and passion.

Balekwa, the director of Activism Productions, traces his love for storytelling back to his turbulent childhood. "I grew up in a divided home. There was no unity in the household. Growing up wasn't a pleasant experience so I would write out my feelings of anger on paper," he said. A pivotal moment came in 2019 when he accompanied a friend to Guga

S'Thebe, in KwaLanga, Cape Town, where he got his first opportunity to recite a poem. "After wowing the crowd on the day with a monologue, the arts journey had well and truly started. After immersing myself in poetry, I found that I was able to control my anger," he added. As a film director, writer, and producer, Balekwa's work centers on community activism and what he refers to as "activism". His mission includes mentoring young children and creating art opportunities and safe spaces for them to explore their artistic talents. He aims to demonstrate that being an artist is viable career path alongside more traditional roles like doctors and lawyers. Balekwa is passionate about producing authentic African stories. "Our passion lies in educating young people about African lineage ... we also take on board both those with formal education and those without to show off their skills and co-create through a programme called Filmmakers Corner, where we invite different township filmmakers to gather at Guga S'Thebe and have conversations about filmmaking." This encompasses after school programmes for the youth and collaboration with organisations around Cape Town. In 2019, Balekwa's career gained momentum with the Emthonjeni Heritage Film Festival, which provided financial backing for his project "Ithongo". This was followed by "*Uqhawuka kwe Camagu*", a film created by first-time filmmakers. After its release in July 2023, the film was screened at Bertha House in Mowbray, and it earned a nomination at the Mbawula Youth Film Festival in Kimberly.

### **Transforming resources**

Balekwa further honed his skills through UCT's Stepping Stone five-week course, which he completed in 2023. "It was a great platform. The people I met there I keep in touch with to this day. The way I prepared myself for the course was on a clean slate because firstly it's UCT and secondly, it was a big learning curve for me when it came to documentary ethics: how to treat your staff and building your relationship with people you interview," he explained.

"I enjoy telling stories in an authentic way. Our stories need to be told by us in a way that serves us. I want there to be a sense of pride in, for example, the telling of isiXhosa stories, for people watching it to feel a connection to the storytelling."

A producer at Stepping Stone and Balekwa's former mentor, Marion Seymour, praised his growth and dedication. "The team Zolani worked with is an intense one. Zolani is a remarkable character because he is aware of his strengths, and he plays towards them. He isn't afraid of what he doesn't know. He takes what he knows and runs with it. He isn't afraid to ask for advice. He comes across as quiet, but once you listen to him, you'll find out he's truly passionate about art and I like that he uses art as an activism platform. He looks at opportunity more than struggle," she noted.

Seymour also highlighted the value of the Stepping Stone programme. "I would encourage people to join because it allows people from different backgrounds to come together and share their experiences and gives people an opportunity to engage in conflicts to help them grow as a person and challenge the status quo while imparting hard skills to produce art."

*Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News*

**ENDS**

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