

## **Cultivating Relationships, Growing Food, Raising Society**

Evergrow Seedlings, a Soweto-based horticulture business, has as its motto “Growing the Extra Mile”. For co-founder Phetole Raseropo, this speaks both to his personal life and the career trajectory: a story of growth, and reaching out to others, in building mutually beneficial relationships.

Looking back, Phetole traces the beginnings of his career to his schooldays. Lured by the delights of the tuckshop, he wanted lunch money rather than a lunch box. His family not being sufficiently accommodating, he set about earning it himself. “There was an avocado tree in our yard, and used to sell the avos at school,” he recounts, “later I moved into selling sweets. In grades 8 and 9, I was hardly in class because I was running that business. Fortunately, in Grade 10, I started to take my studies more seriously.”

Phetole went on to study botany at Fort Hare in 2012, graduating with a B.Sc in 2016. Echoing the humble entrepreneurial beginnings of his avocado sales, in 2018, he and a colleague from his university days, Andile Gcaza, established Evergrow.

Its primary product was to supply seedlings to farmers, particularly small-scale farmers and urban producers in the surrounding communities. There is no substitute for experience, and the early years of Evergrow learned by trial and error. Plans to sell radish seedlings, for example, fell flat for lack of demand, while staples like spinach and spring onions had numerous takers.

At the same time, Phetole was employed as a state agricultural extension officer in the Eikenhof area in 2019-2020. This brought him into contact with a community of farmers, which gave him an up-close perspective on the difficulties they were facing, and the crisis of food insecurity on the area.

“My work as an extension officer gave me an understanding of the practicalities of farming and of farmers’ lives. I was privileged in the contacts I made, and the long-term relationships that I was able to build.” This planted the seed of another idea, using Evergrow as a community development enabler.

Phetole enrolled in the Raymond Ackermann Academy of Entrepreneurial Development in 2021-2022. With the COVID pandemic having shut large parts of the economy down, he felt he needed to use the time productively, and having come across the programme on social media, and felt it would be a useful upgrade to his business skills.

He speaks approvingly of the programme as a whole. More than any of the individual courses, he points to the interactions with his instructors and the shift in outlook that they gave him. For him, RAA-ED was a time of enormous personal growth. He recalls, for example, the injunction from Programme Leader Mlato Mqoni that as an entrepreneur he would occupy a leadership role in society – he would be under scrutiny for the choices they made and how they were able to transition their dreams into reality.

He also speaks of his weekly discussions with Ian McCloy, his programme mentor, which he credits with altering his overall approach to business. “He helped me to see that challenges would always be there, but the issue is how we react,” Phetole comments, “This has helped me to alter the way I think about business and what I am looking for. So, yes, there are times when I will do things without an immediate reward, but as an investment in the community, or in my brand.”

This is reflected in the trajectory of Evergrow, and its growing portfolio of community work. It is involved in supplying seedlings to emerging farmers to assist them in getting started – though once they start showing some turnover, Phetole insists on payment, as this makes an important statement about cutting off dependency.

It has also been active in building community gardens and visiting farmers in other provinces. In some cases, this has been done in collaboration with larger entities as part of their Corporate Social Investment. “The idea is to give hope, to give dignity to people. Community gardens help people to grow their own food, and give them an opportunity to earn a small stipend. It’s about supporting people to show resilience in difficult times.”

In addition to his hand-on work, Phetole has a Tik Tok persona, the Seedling Guy, which takes coaching into the digital space.

The past year, 2024, he adds, has been a great one. He is leading a team of some 45 people, and a steadily growing set of offerings and projects, and he exudes optimism about the prospects ahead.

The RAA-ED, he concludes, has been fundamental to this. Just as he views Evergrow as something more than a business, he says of the programme: “It was the true definition of social impact.”