

Boost for Ermelo recycling project

Motivated by a strong desire to clean up the environment, while also fighting unemployment, hunger and the threat of drugs in her community, Johanna Leshabane launched the Bophelo Recycling project in 2007.

While the project started out relatively small, the power of partnerships has seen it grow to the point where it now employs two full-time staff members and three freelancers who have raised collection volumes to over 40 tonnes per year.

The business recently received a further boost when national industry body, PET Recycling Company (PETCO), and PETCO member and polymer producer Safripol handed over supporting infrastructure worth R500 000 to further Leshabane's vision.

The joint contribution included, among other things, a shipping container, electricity supply, trailer, roofing structure, trolleys, signage, fencing and branding, as well as training and mentoring support.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," Leshabane said. "I see a future in which, instead of transporting our collected waste to Gauteng, recycling plants will rise throughout Mpumalanga, offering employment to youngsters who have ideas and visions the older generation may not have thought of."

The recycling idea came to Leshabane on visits to Johannesburg and Pretoria, where people were meaningfully employed keeping the streets clean.

"Ermelo, by comparison, was a disgrace, but what to do? I was employed full time and had neither the time nor the means to tackle the problem."

Nevertheless, she began the groundwork

and approached the local municipality to identify land on which her project could be born. That partnership has continued to bear fruit, with both parties working together to educate the next generation through recycling awareness in schools.

Next came a blessing in disguise when Leshabane's employers asked her to accept relocation or take a retrenchment package.

"I opted for the package. Something inside me told me that the lump sum I would receive would open recycling doors for me. I could create a better future for myself and the environment as well as creating jobs in my community."

But it was when the partnership with PETCO was forged in 2017 that Leshabane enjoyed her first real 'wow' moment. She also approached local businessman, Gerhard Pieterse, who saw the opportunity to support his community by allowing her to trade rent-free on one of his business properties.

"At last, I was going somewhere. They were going to help me create jobs and put food on the table," said Leshabane.

Another partnership was unveiled when a joint initiative aimed at unlocking meaningful strategies to address waste reduction was launched.

Stakeholders from PETCO, Safripol, the Ermelo municipality, Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs, Gert Sibande District Municipality, and the South



Recycling in Ermelo has been given a major boost, following a R500 000 donation of equipment and infrastructure.

African Local Government Association were represented at the function.

Explaining what this partnership means, PETCO collections and training project manager Belinda Booker said partnerships between government, business and industry were key to unlocking meaningful strategies to address waste reduction in South Africa.

"We have begun partnering with government departments, conducting training and workshops for officials as well as SMMEs and co-operatives.

"We also sponsor projects like Bophelo with equipment to grow and sustain their businesses, thereby stimulating job creation, alleviating poverty, and promoting a cleaner environment and development in our country. By growing these SMMEs we increase the quality and quantity of their PET collections, which assists PETCO in achieving our recycling targets."

Booker said it was great to see members like Safripol taking their extending producer responsibility seriously by supporting small business models, especially in rural areas where waste management was not well serviced or a priority.

"This is our first direct support towards an operation like this. Safripol is strongly committed to our environment and we believe it is very important for us to use all avenues to address the prevention of plastic pollution in our beautiful country.

"We believe that this initiative is the beginning of a journey for us and other key stakeholders. With the help of PETCO, we will develop the path forward as and when it requires expertise and collaboration," concluded Safripol's technology and innovation executive Gert Claasen. □



PETCO's Belinda Booker (centre) and KAP Chemicals (Safripol) chief executive officer Leigh Pollard hand over new equipment to Johanna Leshabane (left).