**Thabo Putu, community partner and former Programmes Coordinator, Community and University Partnerships, University of the Witwatersrand**

By Kim Etingoff

Thabo Putu describes himself first and foremost as an “activist.” Growing up during the height of apartheid in the city of Soweto, community activism was, and remains, a major part of his life. At the University of the Witwatersrand (or Wits), a public research university in Johannesburg, his job as the Programmes Coordinator for CUPS (Community Univeristy Partnership) was to "fight for the rights of communities.". At the same time he nurtured thousands of students who passed through community engagement programs at Wits, providing experiences, supporting and teaching them how to interact with the wider world, perhaps becomes activists themselves.

Thabo's role is situated in the larger context of community engagement in South African universities and at Wits. All universities must and have to participate in some sort of community engagement activity, as required by South African Higher education legislation. CUPS has been an effective and central organizing force behind community engagement across Wits University, according to Thabo, although community engagement is not always as prioritized as he would like to see, sometimes it gets a back seat to research and teaching. He also noted the physical isolation of universities as a challenge to be addressed. To engage with the community, ”You have to take students out of the university campus to the community, community members are not able to access to the university easily," he says.

In addition to activism, Thabo also has a background in teaching that contributes to his outlook on community engagement strategies today. He has used his teaching skills to encourage the next generation of leaders, describing his approach as "education now, activism later," meaning that education provides an important base for students to jump off of to become activists. He says if you are informed you are armed to act, to make better decisions. Many students at Wits have not experienced life outside the communities they grew up in, and Thabo and his colleagues recognize the importance of introducing them to the rest of the world, which is often very different from the world from which they come. Wits has taken students to Mozambique, a neighboring country, as well as rural South Africa, where they experience living and working with poor communities without basic amenities. Students sometimes express shock that these communities exist so close to their own. Thabo commented that seeing communities in context also helps students understand social issues and regional challenges such as immigration, poverty, and xenophobia.

Wits students participating in these programmes are given a chance to reflect on such experiences to enrich their learning, and personal growth. Witnessing personal transformations has been very satisfying for Thabo. He related a story of a student who went on a community engagement trip to Mozambique, who was inspired and changed her career path to teaching so that she could continue the valuable work she had started on the trip.

Thabo enjoys working with students, and balances their needs with the needs of the communities they are working with. He acknowledges that community service can be a one-way street, with student projects taking advantage of their hosts. One strategy used to address this issue is a Service Level Agreement, which is signed by the student. It holds students responsible for respecting the community and listening to the community's stated needs. In his work, Thabo emphasizes to students that they are traveling to communities to learn and listen, not to teach, and that interactions with the community are always about both giving and receiving. Thabo's approach to community engagement can best be summed up by his "Three E's" (Entrance, engagement, and exit). First, it is important to focus on how students enter the community; they must do so respectfully and with open ears. Second, students must engage with community members without being patronizing or bossy. Third, students must exit the community by showing appreciation and without making promises to the community they can't keep.

While at CUPS, Thabo focused on making community partnerships sustainable, a challenge in light of a constantly changing student population. His work to create strong partnerships ensured continuous benefits for both communities and Wits University programs, without having to renegotiate relationships and start from the beginning for every project undertaken. Thabo says, “Involving and inviting community leadership helps demonstrate that their participation is valued and that their views will be considered. This can help to build trust, increase communication and create openness to utilizing services.”

Thabo held the position of Program Coordinator for ten years. During that time, he help transform CUPS, tapping in to Wits' commitment to community engagement. He engaged students who were required to participate in community engagement activities as part of their degrees, as well as students who were purely volunteers and offered their time to help local communities. Although Thabo is no longer with CUPS, he has continued in the same line of work with Boundary Crossings, an organization dedicated to development, democracy, community development and life skills programs. He has built on his work at Wits, and continues to engage with both students and communities.

As an activist with many connections and with a good reputation, Thabo was able to coordinate with many communities who had needs that could be filled by Wits students. When he began his work at CUPS, there were around twenty-five students participating in community engagement projects. By the time he left, there were three thousand students.

*Thabo Putu is currently the Director of Boundary Crossing, a non-profit focusing on community engagement activities, and was the long-time Programmes Coordinator at the Community and University Partnerships office at Wits University. He recently spent six months in the United States as an International Civil Society Research Fellow with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. He holds a University Diploma in Education and Teaching and a Master's Degree in Public Management from North West University.*