'Hardships only made me stronger'

STANGER WEEKLY REPORTER

DESPITE being an abandoned child and mocked at by learners for not having good clothes and living in a shack, former Glenhills resident, Richard Mkhize still managed to make a success of his life.

He used all the harsh words and difficult experiences to mould him into a strong individual who aimed for greater heights.

The once abandoned boy is now one of the youngest engineers at Eskom in Witbank.

But despite this he never forgets his roots or where he came from.

Speaking about his years as a young boy, Mkhize said he grew up very confused.

"As a kid, I had many unanswered questions like where my parents were and why did they leave me?"

His father disappeared when he was only three-years-old and two years later, his mother also deserted him. Mkhize was left to grow up in his grandmother's care.

"Growing up in the warm hands of my grandmother made me forget some of my problems. We lived in a one room shack in Maphumulo but life with her was still good. People used to laugh at our house, but my granny would say don't worry, one day you will build a better house."

However, tragedy struck once again for Mkhize when his grandmother died in 1987.

"I was only eight-years-old at that time and had no-one to care for me. I didn't know what to do at first but

Richard Mkhize

then I realised I had to fend for myself because I had nobody. I found a job herding cattle. I worked for two years, earning R24 a month and in some instances I worked for a plate of food.

"Even though I learnt how to fend for myself, I still spent long days in the forest crying and praying for my grandmother."

Mkhize then lived with his grandmother's sister. Her husband would come home drunk and chase both of them out of the house with a spear and they were forced to spend cold nights in the bushes.

Happiness once again returned to Mkhize's life when he was re-united with his mother six years later.

"It was fine at the time but I was sad because whenever, her boyfriend and son asked who was I, she would tell them that I was her sister's son."

In 1997 at the age of sixteen, Mkhize moved to Stanger and rented a room in Glenhills and began grade nine at Glenhills Secondary School.

"Things were even worse than before. I worked every weekend and holidays to pay rent and buy food. Many times I had thoughts of committing suicide, but God kept me strong. In 1998 the family where I was renting adopted me. That same year, through the grace of God I got to go to Protec and I finally knew that angels existed and they were sent to help me.

"I attended Protec knowing nothing. I could not even construct a sentence in English. My school could not tolerate me, as I was not performing well. They often told me to drop my subject grades. However, my Protec tutors encouraged me to attend Saturday classes and my life started to change for the better.

"Protec offered me free books and stationery every year. My problems now became Protec's problems.

KwaDukuza Resource Manager, Alan Govender became his mentor. Mkhize remembered in the year 2000, he was seated in the matric class without one book to study from, fear and depression set into his life.

"However, that was short-lived, when I received packages from Protec, which had matric books. I always had a longing for my parents but thanks to Protec and especially Alan who

was there for me during my dark days and helped me pass matric, I was a better person.

"Protec gave me a broad vision of my capabilities and I decided to study electrical engineering at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

He received a degree in Electrical Engineering and lives in a lovely home, like his grandmother said and he has

all he ever wished for.

"I want to thank Sappi and Govender for giving me this opportunity to study. With all my heart, I deeply appreciate them for what they did for me. I will be forever indebted to them."

To ensure other children do not suffer the same fate as him, Mkhize is involved in various charity organisations and delivers motivational talks as well.