

MPEPU RURAL YOUTH ENCOURAGEMENT (MRYE) OUTREACH INITIATIVE – 2006-2007

Two of the five “hurdles” which the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Tree Health Biotechnology (CTHB) has to pass as part of its Service Level Agreement, are “knowledge brokerage” and “service rendering”.

Although FABI is involved mainly with post-graduate training and research, the importance of supporting and being involved in outreach programmes at all levels of the educational chain is fully appreciated. FABI is therefore actively involved in communicating the importance of science to learners at school level as well. It has been involved with initiatives such as the UP with Science programme, the National Science Week, visits to local schools, visits of school children to FABI and other SAASTA initiatives.

The CTHB Board approved the support of a special outreach project in 2006 and 2007. The MRYE outreach initiative was started by a group of very inspired and enthusiastic 3rd and 4th year engineering students at the University of Pretoria, all of whom came from disadvantaged rural backgrounds and were aware of the problems of poverty, poor education and deprivation facing these learners in the rural areas. The group’s mission is to preach the message that education would provide the key to enable hard-working learners to rise above their situation and open up opportunities for them to continue with tertiary education and so embark on a successful career.

Initially, without sponsorship, the MRYE group paid a one day visit to rural schools in Kwazulu-Natal in 2005. They provided learners with details of subjects that they needed to take at school in order to follow various careers, discussed courses available at different tertiary institutions and made learners aware of the funding opportunities available to them. Their aim was to motivate these learners and excite them to do well at school so as to open up the opportunity for further study at tertiary institutions. The group developed their own logo with the slogan “Insight inspires success”. They believe that an educated nation = a well informed nation and that the MRYE creates an atmosphere of excellence.

The CTHB sponsored MRYE for three visits in 2006. The first visit took place to Nquthu in Kwazulu-Natal from 18–21 January 2006. Eleven enthusiastic and excited students under the leadership of Samukelo Vilakazi, visited seven schools in the Nquthu area and were able to assist and inform learners and teachers. On the whole they were well received and considered that their visit had been a great success. The second visit was to the Eastern Cape from 8-12 April and was an even greater success. Their third visit was to Limpopo Province during the June holidays and letters were received from two school principals after these visits, requesting that they visit the schools again as the learners and educators had been inspired by the MRYE group and had learnt a great deal from them. On their own initiative and at their own expense they visited Pongola during the September holidays.

In 2007, MRYE planned to embark on four trips. In January they spent 5 days in Mafikeng visiting 2 schools per day. The visit to Limpopo was scheduled to take place during April, but certain difficulties prevented this happening. In July the group visited schools in the Limpopo/Mpumalanga area. Both of these trips were very successful. A trip to KwZulu-Natal is scheduled for the September recess.

The MRYE group at the University of Pretoria has been joined by a few students at the University of Johannesburg who have the same calling to assist the youth in rural

areas. The composition of the MRYE group has also changed. Initially it was made up of one science and 10 engineering students. Now students from the law, science, computing and commerce faculties have also joined the group.

MRYE has been trying to enlist the support of the Department of Education as a letter from that Body would assist them when approaching the education authorities (inspectors and Principals) in the provinces. To date, despite frequent requests, a meeting with DST has not taken place.

The MRYE group has been invited to become part of an initiative run by the DST in collaboration with the South African Institute for Chartered Accountants (SAICA). This initiative supports the delivery of Maths and Science Development Camps in 8 provinces during 2006 and 2007. Bersan Lesch of DST and Gugu Makhanya of SAICA met with the group and are very keen to link the group to this project. The MRYE students could be involved as team leaders for these camps. Samukelo Vilakazi has been working closely with Amos Kova who is in charge of the Limpopo camp. MRYE was instrumental in spreading the news about the Science Camps to the schools they visited in July and recruited a few students for the Limpopo camp where additional learners were needed.

A sustainable source of funding to support the MRYE group is being sought. The CTHB has supported their outreach efforts for two years and would like to continue supporting them. However, the Board would have to approve a third year of funding. It is hoped that the DST/SAICA initiative might also prove to be an additional source of funding.

We wish the group every success in their drive to help the rural youth of South Africa.

The photo shows the MRYE team in their bright and attractive t-shirts displaying the MRYE and CTHB logos.

