

■ COMMUNITY

City surfer helps children ride the waves of hope

Frank Solomon's Sentinel Ocean Alliance organisation offers opportunities for youth

LIZ CLARKE

WHILE most of us may be shivering in our boots this winter, a group of children from a resource-poor Hout Bay community are braving the cold weather, eager to prove they are pioneers of a new and inspirational surf-savvy generation.

Don't worry about the weather, they say. There's no whining, just plenty of excitement about getting into those waves and doing their thing.

Leading the sea-friendly mission is international Cape-based surfer Frank Solomon, who heads a voluntary organisation aimed at bringing hope and new opportunities to youngsters in the Western Cape, particularly those from villages, where fishing is no longer a viable means of earning a living.

"I think many people don't realise just what a crisis this is," said Solomon. "There are hundreds of small villages and communities along our coastline that are suffering hugely from the effects of hunger, poverty, and hopelessness – and the victims are mostly children."

The professional surfer, who has travelled the world seeking the biggest, most challenging waves and riding them in all types of weather, said that there was a seminal moment that changed his life. "While I was in Europe I saw a video of a young boy who was caught in the crossfire of rubber bullets during a recent Cape beach fracas involving the public and the police. He was walking along the same beach as I walked along at the same age, when I was learning to surf. Seeing this video made me determined to try and do something and give disadvantaged kids the same opportunities I had."

The "something" that Solomon did was to establish an umbrella organisation called the Sentinel Ocean Alliance, which helps train underprivileged kids in ocean safety skills and helps them



CAPE-based surfer Frank Solomon, inset, heads a voluntary organisation aimed at bringing hope and new opportunities to youngsters in the Western Cape, particularly those from villages where fishing is no longer a viable means of earning a living. | SUPPLIED

find future employment as lifeguards.

Last week, Solomon's alliance programme was honoured as a top nominee in the Cape Town Sports Awards 2019 in the Sport Builder of the Year category.

"It's great to be honoured in this way," he said. "But the frustrating part is that with government support we could be doing so much more. We have land leased to us on a temporary basis by the Department of Public Works, but because of the 'temporary' tag we cannot raise the funds we need to sustain what we are doing long-

term. We are hoping this will change, rather sooner than later."

Solomon said he is no hero, just somebody who cares about the country and the welfare of kids who need doors opening for them.

"For me, it wasn't about reinventing the wheel, but rather about working with groups like Waves For Change, which does amazing work with underprivileged kids in Hout Bay, teaching them about the surf and surf safety. We have 100 kids a week coming through the programme, boys and girls, and it's been a really great

partnership. We supply the wetsuits and the equipment."

The ocean's calming and soothing effect, Solomon believes, is the fundamental starting point.

"Many of our surf learners come from difficult and challenging backgrounds. When I'm going down to the beach, I'm coming from my nice house and I've had a great breakfast. But they are coming down typically from a shack where they have to share space with a lot of people and are often not well-nourished. When they sit cross-legged in their wetsuits on the

beach, you can almost sense that the tension is reducing. Before they enter the ocean, they do a short meditation, thinking about the positive things in their lives. This is so important as it helps change their perception about life and brings in the element of hope and chances of success."

The Sentinel Ocean Alliance, Solomon explained, manages the beach-training programme and the different initiatives involved, including Waves For Change and surf life-saving project.

"My dream is to open The Ocean School where I'd like to teach kids about the environment, and about looking after the environment, especially the ocean, where the plastic in our shops and supermarkets land up. It's a terrible problem."

Solomon admits that he has never run a charity before.

"Let's say I'm winging it and learning as I go. When you see people who have had nothing given the chance of a positive future, it's a humbling experience."

Among those life-changing projects is the training of lifeguards to manage the city's main beaches. "This month, eight of our surf learners were given full-time employment as lifeguards, earning as much as R10 000 a month. This is really encouraging."

"With public and private support, as well as buy-in from the city, we could do so much more."

According to research into the ocean sports economy, the industry for surfing, lifesaving, kiting, kayaking and fishing is worth R1.6 billion and growing. "If I can help to train these kids to fit into that economy, whether it's working on the tuna boats, taking people for kayaking or whale watching, or taking people surfing that would be a dream come true. There's a huge amount of job opportunities in South Africa and thousands of people desperately looking for work. Bridging that gap is where the answers lie."