

WOF firefighters beam in yellow and blue

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There was no mistaking the pride of the newly recruited and trained Working on Fire (WOF) firefighters during their team inspection at the Sedgefield Community Hall on Friday, August 15.

Standing tall in his perfectly starched yellow-and-blue uniform, firefighter Headman Siyona expressed his gratitude towards the WOF programme. "This programme came at the right time. It changed our lives. From being jobless and not having money for food for my wife and two children, I can now proudly say that I can provide for my family," he said.

Siyona added that besides passing a fitness test, WOF expected nothing else from the men during their recruitment phase. WOF not only trains the recruited men to become competent firefighters, but also provides much-needed support for those recruits who may have personal problems. "This programme gave us all the opportunity to improve ourselves. Education is the key to a good future and WOF has given us the key for great jobs in the Southern Cape and even the Western Cape government," he con-

cluded.

The enigmatic key-note speaker, Eden District Municipality's executive mayor, Wessie van der Westhuizen had his audience in the palm of his hands when he told them that he had grown up in the area. Van der Westhuizen compared the opportunity that the WOF firefighters had been given to the Cinderella story. "Just like Cinderella, many of you didn't have a father present and were made to scrub floors and do hard labour," he said. "Cinderella, just like you, had a dream of freeing herself from the hardship of life, and when the opportunity came, she embraced that dream. Just as all of you did."

The firefighters listened intently as he continued to tell them how opportunities often come into your life only once. "As Headman [Siyona] said earlier, his programme is a life-changing opportunity. As Cinderella grabbed onto the opportunity to fulfill her desire of going to the ball, so you to must hold onto this opportunity which will help you reach your goal. This opportunity has had a positive impact on your lives. Please do not slip back into the negative."

With tears in his eyes, Van der Westhuizen recalled how he had been called to several accident scenes where army recruits in Outdsroom

had been killed. "They slipped into the negative again. They would drink in Outdsroom and drive to George, carry on drinking and kill themselves in the pass. Others would drink at the army base, go to a club and wrap their car around a pole on their way home. Leaving three instantly dead. Please do not slip back into the negative. Embrace this opportunity and make yourselves and your families proud."

In closing he reiterated: "Make the best of this. Be positive of your opportunity. Don't drag the negative back into your lives."

Winston Smith, WOF assistant managing director, welcomed the new firefighters and said that they will not only save lives but also address the vulnerability of eco-systems. He echoed Siyona's sentiment in saying that the WOF programme touches many lives within the community. "We empower these men to address the social problems within their community, such as substance abuse, Tuberculosis and HIV/ Aids." Smith concluded by telling the men that there was a great task ahead of them. "I know that you will be there for your community and understand that everything you do is for the greater good."

The new recruits stepped outside into the street and showed off their newly acquired marching skills. Not only were the firefighters filled with pride as they performed their drill perfectly, but so were their instructors, government officials and parents as they marched past in their uniforms. Sedgefield Fire chief, Donald Muller and the general manager of WOF operations in the Western Cape, Shane Christian performed the inspection of the drill squad and were more than happy with their appearance and their skills.

Krystna Municipal Ward 1 councillor, Irene Grootboom, looked as proud as any mother as she addressed the new firefighters. "My heart was touched as I watched your drill outside. I watched many of you grow up. Today you are men filled with honour and pride. You managed to lift yourselves out of poverty and I watched you reach out to those who needed your guidance. I wish only success for you. Go out and show the world what you are made of."

To finish off the ceremony, firefighters and their parents enjoyed a boerewors roll and cool drinks while mingling with the dignitaries.



At the new WOF recruits' parade were (in front, from left) Eden District Municipality's executive mayor, Wessie van der Westhuizen, Krystna Ward 1 councillor, Irene Grootboom and Bishop Henry Mc Comb (Eden District Municipality management services, chairperson).

Photo: Fran Kirsten.