



## Women in leadership: Karen Nelson

### Description

A person's success is often measured by how much money they have made, their net worth, real estate portfolio and any other such material possessions that they have amassed over the years. Maybe that is too materialistic a view of success to be palatable for some of you. Some prefer to measure success by the impact that one has on those in their community and the world over. Dr Wayne Dyer is famously quoted for saying that, "the measure of your life will not be in what you accumulate, but in what you give away"

If the above statement holds any truth, then Karen Nelson, is more than a successful woman. She is the co-founder of the non-profit organization IseeU, which focuses on upskilling and preparing high school girls for life through mentorship.

IseeU is the product of two former lawyers: Karen Nelson and Hayley Philander. Karen studied law at the University of Cape Town, completed her articles and practiced as an attorney until she suspended her career to care for her four children. She enjoyed and fully embraced the opportunities that motherhood afforded her. When her children were grown up and her schedule was more flexible, she partnered with Hayley to start the organization.

Karen and Hayley at an "Explore" initiative. "Explore" is one of the pillars of the mentorship programme.

This organization was born in post 1994 South Africa. The dismantling of the Apartheid leviathan meant that people of colour who were previously and unequally discriminated against, were afforded entrance into the job market, many of which were in the service industry. So young people entered the workspace, many of which were in the service industry. But there was friction with customers and employers because the quality of service provided was not up to par. And from a glass half-full perspective, she realised that the problem was not that young people did not want to work, but that they were not adequately trained and mentored. They weren't job ready, and their employers were not doing anything to upskill them. The co-founders went on to do research, talking with employers in corporate spaces and service providers on what skills they expect from young people. It's this need that IseeU was created to meet. The organization focusses on mentoring young women and girls in grades 10 - 12.

Mentorship is more than training and it is more than telling girls what is required of them. It is a more personal approach to youth development. Karen calls it, "a mining expedition," because what you're doing is unearthing the diamond inside each girl. Karen herself is a product of the women who have mentored and poured into her life. She made an honourable mention of her English teacher who did so much with little resources, but had an incredible impact on her own life and inspired a passion for English, often going above and beyond to bring the classroom alive.



The IseeU logo

The logo of the organization is a mirror reflecting the words "IseeU." Karen says, "When you walk with these girls, you see more of them than they see in themselves. You have to hold that mirror up in front of the girls, no matter for how long, until they begin to see their value and find their voice."

Many success stories find their beginnings with a mentor who saw the greatness before the person being mentored did. Mike Tyson, the greatest heavyweight boxer of our generation and arguably of all time, is always brought to tears during interviews when he thinks about Cus D'Amato. "How did Cus know? How did he know that this kid from the Brooklyn projects was going to be the greatest in the world?" That is the effect of the mirror, believing in someone until they begin to believe in themselves.

Undoubtedly, it is not always rosy. On some days it is hard to find motivation and on others it is easy. However, Karen finds inspiration by looking at who they are in Christ. One girl once asked her: “Why do you do this?” And she answered by saying that “honestly I would not do this if Christ was not in my life and if he didn’t love me and put love in my heart for him.” And, so when she sees these girls, she sees them as the image of God. This is places value and worth on these girls’ lives. Because often, young women from this background are reduced to statistics.



” This pic was taken at The Clay Cafe in Hout Bay as part of the “Explore” component of our Mentoring Programme. The aim with “Explore” is to broaden our mentees’ worldview; to expose them to opportunities outside their usual frame of reference and by doing so, help them see beyond their circumstances into a different future for themselves.” – Karen.

Karen’s birth and perseverance of IseeU is more than a job, it is a calling and one that has impacted many young women to date and more in the years to come. It is for this reason the Bellwether celebrates and commends the great work done to inspire equity and explore.

If you wish to get in contact with Karen or Hayley look at the contact information below:

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