



Mdu Gama has made history by becoming the first ever recipient of a PhD degree in Finance to be awarded by the University of Johannesburg. Gama is the CEO of Safika Asset Finance and grew up in Newcastle, KZN.

IT guru to use success story to motivate rural kids

BARBARA COLE

A FINANCIAL and IT guru who has made academic history, is to celebrate his success next month with schoolchildren in a rural KwaZulu-Natal community.

Entrepreneur Mdu Gama will travel from his home in Johannesburg to Mafahlwane, 35km from Newcastle, which he has adopted since making it big in the financial world and becoming the first person to gain a PhD in finance from the University of Johannesburg, and its predecessor, the Rand Afrikaans University.

His ground-breaking research into capital investments in IT found that South Africa

spent more than R60 billion on IT last year, but that the decision makers often made huge investment decisions without a clear idea whether they made economic sense or not.

Gama, who grew up in Madadeni, Newcastle, wants to share his success with children in Mafahlwane next month.

As well as inviting them to a party, he will tell them that if he can do it, so can they.

"If they play their part and get a good matric, I will help to kick-start their life," he said during a visit to Durban.

Gama, 41, who was born in Soweto, will tell them he is not interested in how poor they are, just in the potential they show. He owns his own finance

company and has a string of directorships and shares in other companies, and has already helped one local pupil go to university. The student is now a qualified chemical engineer.

Gama aims to motivate pupils with his success story, which really started when a lecturer at the University of Zululand told him that "maths and science are not for blacks".

Instead of putting him off, the comment served to inspire him and he later left to get into the University of Lesotho.

"When I arrived, I had no money, no scholarship and no shelter. It could not get worse than that," he said.

Life improved when a lec-

turer let him sleep in his study. A few months later he got a scholarship, and he graduated with a BCom (accounting) degree. He was also named the top student in the Department of Business Administration and received an award from the Lesotho Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Gama followed this up with an MBA at the then University of Durban-Westville, a stint at Cornell University in New York on a USAid scholarship, and he also attended a senior management programme at Henley University in the UK.

Gama worked with chartered accountants in Newcastle, for Unilever and for the Spar Group in Durban, before

being head-hunted by an Australian-based asset finance company to help set up their South African operation.

Then, 10 years ago, he set up his first finance asset business.

Because it needed a lot of cash up-front, to enable clients to acquire assets, Gama joined forces with two banks.

"A lot of businesses remain small because they are short-sighted and want to be the only one in it," he said.

Two years later, came a new era and another company, Safika Asset Finance, a technology finance company with Gama owning most shares. His other partners include Standard Bank and Liberty Life.

Their major clients include

BHP Billiton, Murray and Roberts and the KZN Department of Health. "We finance their equipment as well as hospitals and clinics," he said.

Talking about his PhD degree, he said that a recent study revealed that worldwide, 90% of IT projects went over budget, 98% changed the original objective, 20% were inappropriate for users' needs, with just 30% doing a risk analysis.

His research led him to tools that would be helpful in evaluating IT investments and he hoped industry would contact him so they could work together to get the right IT for their needs. Now he is planning to do a PhD on entrepreneurship.

