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3 students are shattering SA's gloomy statistics of education, and truly beating the odds.

By *Caitlin Graaf* on October 3, 2017

Rodger Chinhague, Justice Masinge, and Samkelisiwe Chissano are breaking the mould of what it means to be students from rural South Africa.

Three students sat in the same row in Sidlamafa Secondary School in Kamhlushwa, a small town in Mpumalanga province. Justice and Rodger shared a desk, and Samkelisiwe sat next to them. These three, of approximately seventy students in the classroom, have collected 2.7 million rands (approximately \$205,000 USD) in scholarships.



The odds are stacked against students from rural areas of South Africa. Class sizes are large and pass rates are small. The frustration of under-resourced school buildings and a collapsing education infrastructure in rural regions is underpinned by Mpumalanga's dense summer heat. While the heat is rising, so is South Africa's desperate need for ethical

leaders, thoughtful professionals, and groundbreaking entrepreneurs.

The narrative of education in South Africa has hit a sour note. Statistics shed an erroneous belief that students from rural areas are cut from the same cloth – an ilk that has been situationally predisposed to failure.

In light of marginal pass rates, what are the odds that 3 students sitting in the same row, at the same school should be awarded an astonishing amount of scholarship money to pursue higher education?

Statistically speaking, the odds are more than 1 in 1,000,000. These improbable odds shatter perceptions of rural South African youth.

"When I got accepted to the program I got confused because of the different emotions I felt! I felt a strong feeling that I could not control in my gut, as if my stomach was shrinking and all the air in me was been sucked out...this is as close as I can get at describing how happy I was!" – Justice Masinge

Rodger, Justice, and Samkelisiwe are all students at Imagine Scholar – an afterschool mentorship program that unleashes the potential of each individual by employing an alternative approach to enhancing critical thinking, communication skills, community engagement, and character development. While these 3 students share core character traits and a strong sense of community that has helped them succeed, one simple thread is consistent: they all love to learn.

"I feel like it's an illusion when I think of what just happened in our lives; Justice, Samkelisiwe, and I went to the same primary school, and same class at high school. I can conclude that our collaboration throughout these years helped us build each other up to where we are, rather than seeing each other as competitors." – Rodger Chinhangu

Rodger, a quippy and industrious then-16-year-old previously successful in building and racing an award-winning electric vehicle and designing a solar power system, was one in just 1 in 7 young South Africans accepted to complete his high school career at the prestigious United World College. Rodger, UWC class of 2018, is currently completing his International Baccalaureate at the sleekly designed, optimized for creativity UWC Dilijan in Armenia. Rodger received an \$80,000 USD (approximately 1.1 million rands) scholarship to complete his two years at UWC Dilijan and catalyze his bright future at the nexus of engineering and environmental sustainability.

Justice, a quiet and dedicated leader among his peers is a deeply rooted pillar in Imagine Scholar's community. His thoughtful approach reflected in his unique aptitude for chess, Justice established local chess tournaments to share his passion and foster critical thinking skills for youth in the

Nkomazi region. In early 2017, Justice was accepted into the African Leadership Academy with a full, \$60,000 USD (approximately R800,000) scholarship.

"The application process was nothing more than pure hard work and determination; writing a countless number of essay drafts in search for that one perfect final draft and spending eleven long hours preparing for the interviews! But what I cherish most was getting the chance to explore who I am and who I want to be in the future" -Justice Masinge

African Leadership Academy cultivates extraordinary leaders that will pave the way for a new, globally competitive and ethically operated Africa. The lean number of graduates are poised to catalyze tangible and sustainable change in their home countries.

Samkelisiwe also received the honour of acceptance into the African Leadership Academy, her and Justice calling two spots out of the pool of just 120 of the brightest young minds on the continent of Africa. Samkelisiwe, a consistently top-performing student and recent attendee to the Yale Young Global Scholar's program at Yale's main campus in New Haven, Connecticut, also received \$60,000 in scholarships to complete her studies.

"I remember panicking at the slightest thing that went wrong because I knew this was the chance of a lifetime. I couldn't believe it when the news was brought to me. I knew I had done well, but I still had my doubts so being accepted to ALA was a major shock. I think I didn't speak for a whole 10 seconds! Even now I still can't seem to wrap my head around it. More exciting is that Justice and I will go together because then the experience will be less terrifying." – Samkelisiwe Chissano

Two of the top educational institutions in the world, United World College and African Leadership Academy send students on to Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Oxford each year. Their stringent and comprehensive application processes ensure only the most promising students join the ranks. Perhaps most notably, both UWC and ALA are need-blind. This means that Rodger, Justice, and Samkelisiwe were given no preferential treatment for their backgrounds and applied against

candidates from top international preparatory schools and highly affluent families. Undoubtedly, it is not common for students from rural South Africa to crack into this echelon of academia.

The province of Mpumalanga has never seen a student attend the United World College or African Leadership Academy who has not gone through the Imagine Scholar program. It is also worth noting that these students are not the first, nor will they be the last.

Jabulani Mthombeni and Mandisa Ngwenya were both accepted into ALA in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Jabulani has gone on to pursue his university degree at the African Leadership University in Mauritius. Another Scholar, Wendy has also recently been accepted to the United World College, and will begin her journey in the Netherlands next year.

A passion for life-long learning and an inquisitive spark are at the crux of Imagine Scholar's innovative program. A confluence of creative inputs and sheer determination empower Scholars to dig deep into identifying their purpose and excelling in their particular arenas of interest. The program places an emphasis on facilitating experiential learning opportunities for students, helping them to transform potential into action.

For Rodger, Justice, and Samkelisiwe, their capacity to excel against all odds has been proven. From one desk in Kamhlushwa to a world of opportunity, these 3 students are changing the face of education in rural South Africa, one statistic at a time.