Kilroe is the founder of Etafeni and has been at the helm of this project since its inception in 2001. Almost a decade later, Etafeni today stands as an organisation at the forefront of service provision for the modern HIV-affected urban family. It all started with the Etafeni Day Care Centre, a 2006 Gold Impumelelo Award-Winner. The centre was opened in 2003 and is an oasis of HIV-care and support in the township of Nyanga.

A Mothers and Infants project was started to provide support for HIV-positive mothers and their babies, with a Voluntary Counselling, Testing and TB-screening programme. HIV-positive mothers were provided with training in sewing, beading, and patchwork. A pool of 50 women now earns a steady income through completing orders for international HIV/AIDS conferences, various Woolworths suppliers and the Teresa Group. Etafeni also runs a successful after-school programme to accommodate vulnerable children. Here children from secondary and high school receive educational support and meals, are provided with safe spaces to do their homework and play, engage in sporting activities and music therapy. An on-site food garden, with fruit trees, is maintained to support the other programmes.

Impumelelo evaluator, Karin Chubb, recalls: “One needs to visit the project to experience just how special it is. There is a sense of order and structure throughout the project – a result of excellent management and training, and it is something that cannot be faked. There is a sense that everything is going well, children are relaxing into the safe spaces made for them. The sense of order which is created – by seemingly insignificant things like the weekly crèche menu on the wall – is very significant. Children who have experienced trauma need the security of a predictable routine, because that, in itself, becomes part of a healing process”.

Kilroe has now extended this healing process to young adults, helping them find direction after finishing school. Etafeni’s ‘Fit for Life – Fit for Work’ Programme has mentored 240 unemployed young people between the ages of 18 and 30 years old since 2007. It boasts an 80% success rate in helping youth find paid employment.
for internships with stipends, or tertiary studies with a bursary. The intensive training takes 12 weeks, targeting young people who have matriculated and who have potential but lack the support and knowledge to explore options for employment.

Lingiwe (25) who is currently in the programme comments: “I have come to learn about myself. I did not know what ‘Fit for Life – Fit for Work’ was. They taught us how to communicate, and to start by respecting yourself. I was so scared to stand up in front of people, but now I can. Now I can make eye contact. Our secrets are safe in the group, I started to talk about things I had never spoken about before, and now I am free”.

These are some of the issues addressed in the first ‘Fit for Life’ phase of the programme. It focuses on life skills and the personal development of young people. The course includes issues of self-awareness, setting personal goals, and how to resist pressures that might limit their ability to achieve them. Sexuality, depression, conflict resolution, and substance abuse are also discussed and students are allowed safe spaces to discuss issues that are important to them.

In the second “Fit for Work” phase, students are taught English, computer literacy, typing and other work-related skills. Learner and driving license support are also offered. Students are assisted to write a CV, prepare for interviews, and to evaluate their options for career paths. The focus of the mentoring is to build the individual capacity of youth so they can be successful in any work they choose. Specialised vocational training is also provided in areas such as hospitality and customer service, electrical engineering, and tourism.

Pamela Mnyango is a graduate of the programme and hopes her peers too can benefit: “everybody’s so confused after Matric about what to do. This project is actually helping us set our goals and what we want to do in life. This is actually encouraging the youth who are just sitting at home, doing nothing. It encourages them also to be confident. So I’m hoping if I go out of Etafeni I will go to other people, maybe friends of mine, just sitting doing nothing, to come to Etafeni and get help.”

Before entering the programme, candidates are interviewed and chosen only if they demonstrate potential and the drive to meet its rigorous standards. Etafeni maintains a close relationship with students, providing a 12-month period of support after graduation. Organisations who employ young people from Etafeni feel secure about its graduates, knowing they have been groomed by a reputable organisation.

Kilroe’s reputation and drive has been noticed by many organisations. Notably, the Elton John AIDS Foundation and Annie Lennox’s SING Campaign, have partnered with her and the Vrygrond Community Development Trust to replicate the Etafeni model in Vrygrond. Elton John, an existing Etafeni funder explains: “I visited Etafeni in 2007 and found it a place of such warmth, purpose and hope. We were keen to work with them to replicate the programme elsewhere. When Annie Lennox and the SING Campaign approached us with the offer of raising money via RTL’s Spendenmarathon charity telethon, it was an ideal partnership for a second centre.” The Vrygrond centre was personally opened by Elton John, David Furnish and Annie Lennox on the 24th of March this year.