

Centrum Guardians: we CAN be heroes

 By Eugene Yiga

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Every day, South Africa's emergency and rescue personnel give 100% to saving lives. Not because it's their job, but because they believe that every single life is worth saving. More often than not their stories of courage go unrecognised and unrewarded. Centrum Guardians was created to honour these incredible human beings and give them the respect they deserve.

"So often we drive passed an incident on a highway and say, 'Thank goodness that wasn't me'," says former Carte Blanche presenter Ruda Landman. "We do not think of who's there at that moment to help."

And yet, after six years of being involved in the Centrum Guardians initiative, Landman has learned to admire the people who are often not seen. "Just this morning, at least three people from the emergency services said to me that it's so wonderful to be acknowledged," she says. "And I think for the people in the top jobs, this is something to take to heart: that the people who work for you need to feel that what they do is recognised."



Robin Fortuin

Over the last eight years, Centrum Guardians has profiled 53 finalists across various emergency disciplines such as medical, water, fire, and rescue. Over 450 nominations were received and 3362 lives were directly affected in the 53 finalist incidents.

"It's been an incredible eight years since we launched the Centrum Guardians project, a cause marketing campaign that recognises and rewards the men and women of the emergency and rescue services of South Africa," says Natasha

Macdonald, the Centrum Brand Manager. "In marketing terms, we can't put any monetary value to the awareness that Centrum Guardians has brought the emergency and rescue services industry of South Africa."

Since it began in 2008, the campaign has evolved from featuring the finalists on live TV (where everyone was on 3 Talk), to 3- and 5-minute action-packed mini-documentary dramas, to a 13-week 24-documentary series, to short-form online content.

"With audiences changing their viewing habits and with digital becoming increasingly integrated into our daily lives, we're presenting the finalists this year on an online forum," Macdonald says. "Each finalist has their own content hub on the website, which consists of a video telling their story, supported by short B-roll video content [interviews with people who were involved with the rescue], a full written incident description, as well as photographs and a host of behind the scenes shots."

Voting for a guardian

Centrum will also flight gripping 30-second TV ads for the duration of the campaign. These will push consumers to the website to meet the finalists, read their stories, and (most importantly) vote for the guardian.

"Voting in 2015 will only happen online, limited to one vote per person," Macdonald says. "As we did in 2013, the public vote will count for 50% of total votes and the balance is going to come from an independent panel of journalists. This is going to help us to level the playing field and help us determine the Guardian of the Year."

The nominator of the Centrum Guardian of the Year receives R2,500. The winner receives R10,000 (if a team) and R5,000 (if an individual) as well as specialised training. The winner's base station receives R35,000. The finalists receive R2,500 per team and valuable specialised training opportunities.

"We have met many dedicated men and women who put their own lives at risk to save the lives of their fellow South Africans," Macdonald says. "We have heard dramatic stories of rescues that have taken our breath away and brought tears to our eyes. We are constantly amazed at the modesty of the nominees and finalists when we ask how they were brave enough to run into burning buildings or swim into dark, stormy waters to save lives. We have a renewed respect for what it takes to be an emergency services member."



Cynthia Maqungu

The first finalist for 2015 is Cynthia Maqungu, a Reservist Fire Fighter for Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality Emergency Services. She saved three people from a burning shack at Ramaphosa Informal Settlement. As a Reservist Fire Fighter, Maqungu works with the PIER (Public Information, Education and Relations) group who are trained to assist in informal settlement emergencies. She used this opportunity to educate the community on fire safety as well as the importance of having sand or water available in their homes in the event of a fire.

"I met Cynthia when we were doing this story in the Ramaphosa Informal Settlement," Landman says. "And I'm so

impressed by her. Many people have hard lives. She makes a shack a home. She has two children who are so perfectly turned out. And she makes it happen with so little... It's not about the money. If you join up for the sake of a salary, you will be out of there in three months because it's too hard."

The second finalist is Robin Fortuin, a 23-year-old Volunteer Rescue Swimmer for the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI), Strandfontein Base Station. Against all odds, the then 21-year-old saved six people from drowning in the treacherous rip currents at Monwabisi Beach.

"Robin was in tears the day when we did the interview because he lost one life, but he saved six!" says Landman. "He now lives in Abu Dhabi and works for the Hilton Hotel because he needs to earn some money. He says it's a bit boring because the water there is like a dam. His life ambition is to work on the water as a full-time rescue swimmer, maybe for the US Coast Guard. But I think we should get him back home."

The third finalist is The Structural Collapse 100-crew rescue team, which is made up of members of the City of Johannesburg Emergency Management Services, Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality Emergency Services, West Rand District Municipality Emergency Services, Rescue South Africa, South African Police Services K9 Search and Rescue, University of Johannesburg Faculty of Health Sciences, Riga Rescue (K9 Search and Rescue), Chris Hani Baragwanath Trauma Doctor and Anaesthetists, ER24, and Off Road Rescue Unit (ORRU).

"I couldn't have dreamed that it would take more than 100 people more than 24 hours to save five lives," Landman says. "We did a long interview with the doctor who was there that night. He has worked in other places in Africa and says that everywhere else, this just wouldn't exist. You have to pay first before anyone will put out a hand to help you. I really think that [this shows why] South Africa is very, very special."



The Structural Collapse 100-crew

Landman gives an example of how the rescue personnel went the extra mile to save one of the men trapped beneath the rubble. He was lying down on his stomach, with a huge steel beam on his arm. And yet there was someone with him all the time (also lying flat since there wasn't enough space) because the team took half-hour shifts to keep the man company.

"Our rescue services are valued around the world," Landman says, pointing out that South African Emergency and Rescue Services are ranked as one of the best on the planet. "They are quite fragmented and yet in a moment like this they come together because there is a focus on one thing that needs to be done: the need to save lives. They form a family and they work for different services but when the need arises, they get there."

The fourth finalist is Michael Callow, an ALS (Advanced Life Support) Paramedic for Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality Emergency Services. He was instrumental in saving the lives of one innocent bystander and two Metro Police Officers after one of the bloodiest shootouts in Ekurhuleni's history. His skill, expertise, and out-of-the-box thinking helped him to save lives.

"South African paramedics deal with several gunshot wounds while people who work in other countries may see [only] one shooting," Landman says. "It is in one sense terrible but in another sense it's amazing because it means that when it happens they know what to do... I'm so proud of our country. And yet so often all we hear are the negative things [like]

when the ambulance does not arrive. But there is also this."

Indeed, it's hard not to feel proud when hearing these stories or when meeting the individuals, many of whom are soft-spoken and humble about their acts of bravery. And yet Landman and many others have continued to grow their admiration and respect for what these people do.

"Six years ago, when we were bringing down the long list to the short list of the finalists, Sue Cartwright [Marketing Manager at Pfizer Consumer Healthcare] and I were the only outsiders at the table," Landman says. "We read through the stories and the two of us were going, 'This is amazing!' [But] everyone else sat around the table frowning and with arms crossed and saying, 'How is this not their job?'. And that was also what we heard from the people every time we went out in the field: 'Why are you making such a fuss? This is just my job'."



Michael Callow

In 2014, Centrum undertook to contribute funding towards specialised training for the emergency and rescue services crews for every pack of Centrum purchased between July and September. Over R500,000 was raised from this initiative.

The funds went to training for Aviation Healthcare Provider Course; High Angle Rope Rescue Training Courses; Fire Prevention and Safety Strategies Course; Combined Light Motor Vehicle and New Car Technology Rescue Techniques and Portable Pump; Operators Awareness and Practical Application Training; 1-Day Snake Identification and Bite Treatment Course; Advanced Defensive; Driver Training Course; NSRI e-Learning Programme; Paediatric Life Support; High Angle Rope Rescue Training Course; Advanced Petrochemical Fire Fighting Course; Vehicular Rescue and Extrication Training Course; and Swift Water Training.

Raising public awareness

"We've created a legacy of specialised training," Macdonald says. "Since 2010, training institutions have sponsored training to the value of R2m. The R500,000 we raised [last year] was nearly doubled by the training sponsors who matched us one for one, bringing the total value of training for the people in the emergency services to an excess of over R3m in the past five years. I think this is amazing and I'm sure you agree."

Similarly, in July and August this year, the public can help to save a life when purchasing any Centrum product. For every pack of Centrum sold, Centrum will contribute funding towards specialised training for the emergency and rescue services.

"The South African Emergency and Rescue Services are ranked amongst the best in the world," Macdonald says. "Centrum is proud to be able to help raise public awareness and well-deserved recognition of this fact... Centrum Guardians is truly a cause marketing campaign success: doing good while doing good business."

To watch the stories and vote for your favourite finalist (closes at noon on 20 August), go to www.centrumguardians.com. The winner will be announced on 25 August 2015 online at www.centrumguardians.com and www.facebook.com/CentrumSA.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugenyiga.com, follow @eugenyiga on Twitter, or email hello@eugenyiga.com to say, um, hello.

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