

A 28 year old dream, finally realised.

SOWETO tycoon Richard Maponya should be retired, now that he is hitting 80 - but his schedule is hectic as the R500m Maponya Mall changes the township landscape.

The old man has realised many of his dreams having owned various successful business at a time when it was unconventional for black people to own business – he couldn't let this dream die.

“As far as I'm concerned there's no such thing as retirement. That mall is going to create so many jobs for the youngsters. It's not just about making money for me. I get joy out of creating job opportunities,” he said.

There's mad excitement going on in Soweto in anticipation of Maponya Mall, which will be completed by September next year. The idea that the township will finally have a mall as big and beautiful as the best in the country just gives me goose bumps.

Imagine 65 000 square meters made up of Woolworths, Edgars, Jet, Truworths, Foschini, Pick `n Pay Hypmarket, Ster Kinekor all under one roof – in Soweto?

All these stores want to get a piece of the estimated R4,3bn Soweto consumer market.

Maponya says that this has been a big dream of his ever since he bought the land along Old Potchefstroom Road some 28 years ago. He's managed to swing in Zenprop and Investec to help finance the development.

“I always believed that the people of Soweto really deserved a centre that they can call their own because they have contributed to the economy of the country, making Johannesburg the great city that it is,” he said.

“If you want to take your family for lunch you'll be welcome to do so. If you want to take your children for a movie, you can just walk them here, and sit at a restaurant waiting for them.”

Richard Maponya's story of success is a very long one, which goes back a number of decades.

Born in Limpopo, and a qualified teacher, Maponya set off for Johannesburg to find a job at one of the Alexandra township schools.

By some stroke of luck, he met a man on the streets who was looking for a young bright black man to work at a clothing factory. He was offered a salary that topped what he would get as a teacher, so he took the job.

“My boss liked me very much. I must have been 21 or so and I was full of fire. I did very well there, and within four months of being employed I was offered a job as a foreman. My boss said it had been the first time he'd worked with a black guy who was smart, self motivated and driven,” he said.

Maponya said that he came to know the clothing industry very well, new his fabrics and would be able to tell you where any garment was made merely by feeling the texture.

“The selections I made were on point – they'd sell out. My department ended up being the best department in that whole company. And resulted in my boss being elevated to CEO.

“He liked me very much – called me son. He said he couldn't promote me to manager because it would mean I'd have to manage white people. And back then ... things were different.

“To remunerate me indirectly, he said he'd make it possible that I get a some of these garments for next to nothing and said I could sell them and make a bit of extra cash.”

This is how Maponya built his empire.

He said he would collect some R5 000 to R10 000 from people who'd bought garments from him every month.

“Life was wonderful because you could trust people enough to pay you when they had the bucks. And there were no muggings there. I remember I used to be able to walk around with bags of money, and never got robbed,” he said.

Maponya eventually left the clothing manufacturing company with the hopes of starting his own clothing shop in Soweto.

But the law wouldn't allow it.

“You see by law we were temporary visitors. And if we weren't working we were suppose to go back to the birthplaces and out of Johannesburg. We were here on permits to come work for the industry. This was in the 60s. I approached Mandela and Tambo who were the first black lawyers.

“I wanted them to represent me so I could get a trading licence. They wouldn't allow me to put clothing in stores – they said it was just for whites.

“They said: I'm not even allowed to have a business, period. I said: there are black people there (in Soweto) and they need to be serviced. They said: we can't give you a clothing licence but we can give you licence to sell daily necessities,” he said.

So he established the very first dairy in Dube and employed a couple of youngsters to deliver milk from house to house on their bicycles.

“It grew into quite an establishment. Milk is a highly perishable product and back then people didn't have electricity, let alone fridges,” he said.

“I then expanded to include a grocery store and butcher, fruit and vegetable store and we also had a little restaurant – I remember the licence for that was 'native eating housekeeper'.

“My wife, Marina, helped me out with the business quite a bit. She was such a workaholic. I met her in the 60s as well and we worked together. She was a good mother and an excellent wife as well,” he said.

Maponya's wife died a couple of years ago.

Now his daughter, Chichi – one of six children - is helping him with his business affairs.

Maponya's business were so popular in Soweto that there's even an area where he used to have a supermarket that was named after him. And is still referred to as Maponya to this day.

“I remember I had a petrol station. It became the busiest station, topping all the stations in the city. It was just a miracle – people get to know you and like you and support you in everything you do.

“We handled our customers as if they were our relatives. We knew our customers by name. People would come from far to come fill up at the garage,” he said.