



gumedde goes
global

Robert Gumedde in relaxed mood at his Steiltes home

Successful and wealthy, Robert Gumede rose above his humble beginnings as caddy at Nelspruit Golf Club to become executive chairman of GijimaAst Technologies, one of the two largest IT companies in South Africa. The perfect example of a self-made man, Robert chatted to us at his Steiltes home about growing up, success and going global...

As the fifth child in a family of seven, with a single mom working as a domestic worker, Robert is no stranger to hardship. He tells a poignant childhood story about playing soccer at the bus stop in the afternoons and how, when the other boys' dads would arrive, they would run off home with their fathers and take their soccer ball with them, abruptly ending the game. "I never had one of my own, and vowed this wouldn't happen to my four children," he says without a hint of self-pity. In his world, obstacles are to be overcome.

Born in what is now Nelsville, he started working at the golf course at the age of seven, caddying for top executives. "I was fortunate to be exposed to people successful in their own right," he says. "To watch and learn." There and then he made a decision: not to be a good employee, but a good employer one day. "It fuelled my ambition - at first to emulate, but then to exceed."

Working as a caddy and gardener for golfers at the club helped him through school until he went to University of Zululand, funded by his own savings and some help from club members and KaNgwane Government. The decision to study law grew from his childhood ambition to become a detective, to "catch crooks". After completing his degree, he returned to Nelspruit and worked in the magistrate's office and then as an adviser in the Ministry of Justice. In 1988 he left law for various reasons, one being a desire to be his own boss.

A number of ventures followed, but after identifying an opportunity in the IT industry he started Gijima Technologies, and never looked back. It has grown to become one of South Africa's IT giants. In five short years, the company grew from 10 people to one of South Africa's largest black-owned IT companies, venturing into other African countries and branching out into telecommunications, networking infrastructure, Smartcard technology and EasyPay transactions.

Robert and his family relocated to Joburg years ago, but despite his busy schedule, come down to the Lowveld every other weekend to recharge the batteries. Sitting on the veranda of his home, dressed in a golf shirt, ready for

tee-off later that afternoon, he speaks about family and values, something he obviously feels strongly about. "Growing up in a single-parent environment made me realise how important building structures are. We're a very close family." Spending as much time as possible with his extended clan is top priority, with a visit to the golf course a close second. "Soccer is my first love," he smiles, "but I'm a good golfer. I've never lost interest in it."

Another great love is travelling overseas, although it often revolves around the kids. "They absolutely love Dubai," he laughs. "It offers contrasts. It may be 50 degrees

Kerzner's resorts. Robert greatly admires Sol for his business acumen, for his ability to export South African talent to difficult markets like the States and Dubai. "The president should give him an award - he isn't getting the accolades he deserves."

Robert's love of travel inspired his decision to venture into this market and he recently acquired a tourism company. "I'm passionate about the sector," he says. "I want to be a global businessman, and this will give me the reach I'm looking for." The plan is to have an office in every major city in the world, to provide an integrated service covering transport, forex, accommodation, goods and services.

He thinks a minute before answering the question relating to advice for aspiring youngsters. "You need to be educated," he says then. "Without an education - forget it. It really limits your outlook on the world. A disadvantaged background should be no deterrent either. You don't need to be the son or daughter of a politician or rich man. I'm a great believer in, if you can dream it, you can achieve it."

Clearly valuing the guidance he received, Robert recently donated 20 computers and a server to each of the two schools he attended, Thembeke High and Khaliphani Secondary. He was also featured on the SABC 2 series *My teacher made me* and paid for two of his teachers, Wentzel Coetzer and Sakkie Nhlapo, to go on holiday in Thailand. His one big gripe is that Mpumalanga doesn't have its own university and feels our leadership is failing us. "We're the only province with no minister, no deputy minister, no national director general and no wonder. I had to go to KwaZulu-Natal to get an education, and living away from home without a support system sets kids up for failure. We should be lobbying for our own university."

His appointment with the golf course beckoning, our interview draws to a close. I ask about his stress levels. "Stress?" he laughs. "I hear people talking about it - I stress when I don't use my brain," a trait he probably shares with many business icons. Despite a calm demeanour, he's a dynamo, destined for far greater things than his already not-too-shabby achievements. The global market beckons and as he says, if you can dream it...

gumede facts

- In 2005, Robert was voted runner-up in the World Entrepreneur of the Year Awards – South African chapter. He eventually lost out to Bill Lynch of Imperial, who went on to win the World Entrepreneur of the Year Award in Monte Carlo.
- Robert is an extremely proud Lowvelder who visits Nelspruit every alternative weekend to see friends and family and play a round of golf at Nelspruit Golf Club. He has made massive donations towards the upgrading and upkeep of the course and has a new bridge as well as the second nine holes named after him.
- Robert is popularly known in Mpumalanga for trying to bring professional soccer to the province through his ownership of the soccer team Dangerous Darkies. To him, a worrying thought is that unless our province has a professional soccer team based in Nelspruit, the new stadium will become a white elephant.

outside, but there's a shopping centre with a ski resort inside." One of Robert's favourites is The Palace at Lost City, a place he's been going to "since I could afford it". Another popular destination is the Bahamas, once again one of Sol