Cancer research professor empowers Africa and the world

HARRIET McLEA

"She's changing the face of chemistry, believe me she's changing it," said Nolwazi Nombona. This is how the Rhodes University Masters student describes her professor of Medical Chemistry and nonotechnology, Tebello Nyokong.

Last month Nyokong added another prize to her growing collection: the City Press/Rapport Prestige Award for her groundbreaking research in cancer diagnosis and treatment. In 2004 Professor Nyokong won the SABC 2/Shoprite Checkers Woman of the Year Award in the Science and Technology category. In 2005 she was given the Order of Mapungubwe by former president Thabo Mbeki.

Finding African solutions to cancer treatment has lead Nyokong's research to photodynamic theory. This alternative to chemotherapy uses a dye which can kill cancer cells only when exposed to red laser light. Nyokong is very excited because the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) has agreed to undertake pre-clinical trials using her drugs which are specifically suited to Africans who are exposed to extreme sunlight.

The other area of her research is in detecting disease-causing agents in food, water and blood on the sensitive nanoscale. This will help with disease prevention of esophageal cancer, for example. Nyokong's dream is to have a cancer diagnosis or treatment product available on the market, but realistically she says that this may take a very long time.

Nyokong studied at the University of Lesotho and at universities in Ontario, Canada and Notre Dame in the United States of America.

Nine imposing portraits of former chemistry lecturers dating back to the early 1900s line the passage to Nyokong's office. She went through a time of what she describes as "academic loneliness" when she arrived at Rhodes as a lecturer in 1992. However Nyokong has certainly proved her mettle in the science world and faced the challenge "so that other women and black people can realise that it can be done."

One of Nyokong's PhD students, Wadzana Chidayanyika attributes her opportunity to study in Japan last year to her lecturer's efforts. Nyokong's passion is to develop future innovators in Africa. Most of Nyokong's post doctoral students are from rural areas and she says, "If I can empower one student from one village, that village will be encouraged and more scientists will be produced. I believe I am also empowering Africa!"

Grahamstown drug scene 101 - Part One

This story is part of a writing project of this year's third year Journalism and Media Studies writing students at Rhodes University.

CELESTE KRIEL

ALL week I had been hearing about the alternative, underground Couch Party. All the so-called cool people of campus were invited. Somehow I had always equated alternative with some kind of drug scene. The alternative scene, though, is not limited to the standard round of spliff-passing; there are much more controversial substances available at these parties as well.

On the night of the party, the hypnotic beat of drum 'n bass could be heard outside the house as we pulled up. We could feel the vibrations reverberating under the seats of the car. Everyone smiled knowingly at each other. Stepping out of the car was a leap into the