Coding Mamas teaches moms digital skills

By Evan-Lee Courie   4 Mar 2020

The digital age is now. The skills gap in South Africa is very evident, more specifically digital skills amongst women, which is why Elisja van Niekerk and Nelisa Ngqulana started Coding Mamas - a space where mothers can learn how to code in a safe environment and be able to bring their kids along.

Elisja van Niekerk, co-founder of Coding Mamas

We chat to Elisja van Niekerk, co-founder of Coding Mamas, who is also a finalist in the Woman in Technology category in the 6th Annual Woman of Stature Awards...

▦ *Can you tell us a bit about Coding Mamas?*

We have a dream and that is to empower moms with the necessary skills to partake in this digital economy. By doing this we will close the skills gap in South Africa and inspire kids to follow in mom's footsteps.

Coding Mamas teaches basic technical skills, coding, web design, app development, website building and empower moms with information about new trends, i.e Data Science, Artificial intelligence etc. via weekend face-to-face, or virtual workshops on weekends. We offer a safe environment where like-minded moms can meet-up and share their knowledge and ideas.

▦ *When, how and why did you get started?*

Coding Mamas was co-founded by myself and Nelisa Ngqulana in 2018 who I met at the #ignitehack, a hackathon where we were both judges. I was busy planning a startup that would teach kids basic coding skills and Nelisa was doing the same but for moms. We then decided that it was a good idea to work together and co-founded the Coding Mamas.

> " *I wanted to create a space where moms, like me, can learn how to code in a safe environment and be able to bring their kids along too. Through the Coding Mamas events and platforms, we aim to create a safe space and experiences that allow moms (and their kids) to prepare for the digital economy; by upskilling themselves, connecting with others and have access to the necessary resources - Nelisa Ngqulana* "

We want to empower moms to partake in the digital economy and to give them the ability to inspire their kids as well as support them in their own digital journeys. In this increasingly digital world, it is also important that our children are digitally literate in order to thrive.

What is the core function of Coding Mamas?

Teaching moms the necessary skills to partake in the digital economy and we offer these skills at no cost to moms.

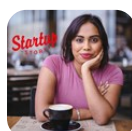### What are some of the obstacles you've had to overcome since starting out?

One of the biggest obstacles we've had to overcome was finding a venue with the facilities we need to teach i.e a boardroom with a projector, table and enough power for laptops, but it must also be a venue that is child-friendly because we want the moms to be able to bring their kids with them. We also teach the kids coding skills or robotics while the moms are busy. We have nanny's that assists us with keeping the kids busy and teaching them age-appropriate coding skills.

Another obstacle that we still need to overcome is that each mom that arrives needs to bring at least a laptop to work on. These laptops differ, so we spend a lot of time in the first hour of our workshop installing the programmes the moms need for the workshop.

Although we do send instructions of what needs to be downloaded on the laptops, the moms don't always have data to downloads the programmes at home, so they wait until the workshop where we can share data or a hotspot on one of our phones. If we had our own laptops with pre-installed programmes that we can teach from we will save a lot of time.

There are many other obstacles that we are still trying to overcome such as finding sponsorships and getting moms certified training. We are looking for sponsorships so that we can keep the training free for moms, but also a network data partner and equipment.

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What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?

Don't be afraid to start, just go for it! If you don't have everything you need now, start with what you have and build up from there. Start small and grow from there. Don't be afraid to ask for help or mentorship, there is always someone out there willing to help - all you have to do is ask.

⠿ *What has been your proudest achievement thus far?*

My proudest achievement thus far is that via our on-site and virtual workshops we have been able to educate and share our knowledge with so many moms and just inspire them not to be afraid of technology but to jump right in and do it.

Seeing all of these moms grow and learn is my proudest moment. When they first arrive at the workshops they are shy and worried that they will disappoint, but during my post-workshop interviews they are excited and proud and leave with something new that they have learned.

⠿ *What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?*

We want to continue passing on skills to moms and pass our entrepreneur skills onto moms so that they are able to work from home for example. With our training, we give moms skills like building a website or an app, as an example, that they can do from home. They can then use these skills to find paying customers and they can have flexible working hours and environments.

⠿ *What would you like to see changed in the South African startup landscape?*

From my personal experience, I found that the startup landscape is very focused on age. Young entrepreneurs find it easier to find funding for startups rather than older entrepreneurs. Incubators should consider looking at opportunity and abilities and not at age.

⠿ *What do you believe are the traits an entrepreneur needs in order to succeed?*

You need to be a problem solver, you need to be able to network and build relationships, you need to be a go-getter, you need to think on your feet and not be afraid to start on your own.

⠿ *Tell us about your biggest struggles as an entrepreneur, as well as some major highlights.*

The biggest struggle has been finding sponsorship to hire a team that can help us grow and run the workshops. Right now, all "staff" are volunteers. We need to find a space where we can work from.

A major highlight was that our idea found its place in the market and the market response to Coding Mamas has very good.

⠿ *Why would you encourage someone to become an entrepreneur?*

There is a lot of satisfaction knowing that something you started is changing lives.

⠿ *Where would you like to see Coding Mamas in the next 5 years?*

An established player in the digital skills development space, not only in South Africa but globally.

⠿ *You're a finalist in the Woman of Stature Awards 2019 in the Woman in Technology category. How do you feel about this?*

I am extremely honoured and proud to be a finalist in the Woman in Technology category and to be a part of the Woman of Stature Awards that celebrates women in South Africa who are change agents and making a positive impact in South African communities. I am looking forward to the awards ceremony on 8 March 2020.

Update: Elisja van Niekerk won the Woman of Technology category at the Woman of Stature Awards

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