

Miami, here I come!

Issued by [Pendoring](#)

25 Jul 2017

2016 Pendoring Umpetha-winner embarks on a new advertising adventure in the USA

For Ogilvy Johannesburg copywriter, Melusi Mhlungu, July 2017 will forever stand out as an unforgettable, red-letter month.

Thanks to his remarkable ability to create award-winning advertising, including a sterling radio campaign that was voted joint-winner of Pendoring's prestigious Umpetha Award in 2016, this month sees him jetting off to the USA where a whole new advertising adventure awaits him as a writer at David The Agency in Miami, Florida.

Says Mhlungu: "I'm very fortunate to have received an opportunity to join one of the best agencies in the States right now... DAVID THE AGENCY in MIAMI. And this is thanks to a lot of people, mostly my 'creative mom', Mariana O'Kelly, executive creative director at Ogilvy Johannesburg. This has always been my dream: to spread my wings, see the world, take what the South African creative industry taught me to the world, learn from this journey, then come back home and pass on my learnings," Mhlungu enthuses.

"I hope I'm able to inspire other young creatives to realise that you don't have to make American work to make it there...if you stay true to who you are, it will happen. I can't beat the Americans at making 'American ads', but what I can do is come with a new perspective mostly because of my upbringing and culture.

"There is no better feeling than being awarded for making truly South African in the work I've done and winning Pendoring's Umpetha Award has meant so much! I believe it's making this kind of different and very South African work that brought me global attention," says Mhlungu.

Now that D-day has finally dawned, the move to "one of the hottest ad agencies in the States right now" brings with it a good measure of trepidation and uncertainty, Mhlungu admits.

"I'm nervous, but mixed with excitement. I'm going to a city I don't know, I'm going to work at an agency I don't know, with people that I don't know. The only thing that I do know is that I've got some ideas and for now, that's the only thing that's keeping me sane."

Izelle Venter, chairperson of the Pendoring Board and channel head: VIA says "Pendoring is extremely proud of Melusi (and all the other creatives who do South Africa proud) and wishes him well in his new and exciting endeavour in Miami. For Pendoring this is just the start to reward creatives in South Africa's vernacular languages other than Afrikaans."

Besides Pendoring's prestigious Umpetha Award as joint overall winner for the best vernacular advertising in 2016, in his relatively short lifespan as a copywriter, Mhlungu has raked in more awards most creatives can dream of. These include Cannes bronze and 5 shortlists, 5 Clio shortlists, a One Show shortlist (both New York-based awards), a bag full of gold, silver and bronze Loeries, 3 Pendoring golds and 3 silvers and 2 runners up awards in Ad of the Year. He was also a RAB Brave Radio competition winner.

But it wasn't always plain sailing. "I remember there was one awards show where I had 21 finalists, but not one single win.



Melusi Mhlungu

That, however, didn't deter me: the next year I had one entry and one gold."

One of his proudest moments was when he was crowned South African Young Creative of the Year in 2015, which took him to Cannes where he competed – and made his mark – against other young creatives from across the world.

"Awards certainly are not the most important possessions one can ever have, and I don't run my life on awards, but they do prepare you for the moment somebody recognises you. They kind of put you in the front line and give you that extra creative edge."

As a student and in his career, Mhlungu consistently moved the goal posts to improve on his achievements. While studying advertising at Vega (where he was admitted even without a portfolio), one of his dreams was to work for one of the biggest ad agencies in South Africa, he continues. "This I managed to do when I was appointed copywriter at FCB, and subsequently at Ogilvy. My next goal was to be awarded SA Young Creative of the Year, which I achieved in 2015. My next dream was to work in ad land in the United States, and now that's finally happening. This is not the ultimate dream...one day I want to have my own agency."

While his entire family firmly supports him in his new American venture, the thought of leaving them behind, evokes mixed emotions. These are the people who have always stood by me and did everything possible to help me realise my dreams. Skype will definitely be our next best friend!"

He is extremely proud of his mother and her five sisters, all of whom he considers his mothers. "One of them (Nomsa) worked at Leo Burnett and that was how I learnt about advertising. By telling me about her job, she ignited the advertising flame in me. And by watching hours and hours of bad ads on TV as a kid, my interest in advertising steadily increased. Not for one moment have I ever regretted joining the advertising world.

The ultimate highlight in his career so far – even bigger than any award he's ever won - was when O'Kelly announced his move to David in Miami to the entire staff earlier this month. "I even had tears in my eyes... not because of going to David, but because I could see my appointment also meant a lot to my colleagues."

Besides O'Kelly, Brett Morris (FCB Africa CEO) and Neo Mashigo (Creative partner, M&C Saatchi Group) have been mentors in every sense of the word. "At different stages of my creative life, they not only pushed me, but allowed me to push myself. They all played different parts and endlessly contributed to a fulfilling creative journey," Mhlungu concludes, adding that "this is only the beginning; South African creatives are coming for the world!"

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Pendoring

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