

# Shades of change spray panelbeating industry

*Initiative empowers black panel shops*

MALOSE MONAMA

TRANSFORMATION in the panelbeating industry continues to unfold, albeit at a snail's pace.

This week Bernard Coka, owner of Toy Panelbeaters in Ga-Rankuwa, became one of the few black panelbeating operators to receive a Major Structural Repairer (MSR) grading from the SA Motor Body Repairers' Association (Sambra).

On being presented with South Africa's top vehicle-repair grading certificate, an overwhelmed Coka said: "This grading that we have worked so long to achieve, and that has cost so much in equipment and resources, will finally allow our business to repair the high-quality vehicles insured by South Africa's major insurance houses."

The award marked a significant milestone in Alexander Forbes's and Guardrisk's Adopt-a-Panel Shop initiative. The initiative, which started in 2005, began with an equipment upgrade at Zombodze Panelbeaters in Soweto in 2006.

This pilot project in Soweto was undertaken to see how the insurance industry could assist in developing a repair supply chain in disadvantaged communities.

Anton Ossip, chief executive of Alexander Forbes Risk and Insurance Services, said: "Since then, working in partnership with relevant industry bodies, we have refined our empowerment model – recognising that the biggest challenge faced by black-owned panelbeaters was a lack of sophisticated equipment and the necessary skills to achieve the correct accreditation as a motor repairer."

As a result, insurance companies were reluctant to send their clients' vehicles to these shops, which meant black business remained at the lower end of the economy with no prospect of accessing mainstream opportunities and preventing business growth.

"We recognised that this part of the industry was caught in a vicious cycle and that as an industry leader Alexander Forbes needed to move this part of the industry forward proactively," said Ossip.

The Adopt-a-Panel Shop initiative has now expanded to Tshwane, with Toy Panelbeaters getting the repair industry's highest grading.



**MAJOR LEAGUE . . .** Township panel shop owner Bernard Coka

This was by no means the end, Ossip said. "We have identified two more black-owned panelbeating businesses for upgrading in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape. Thereafter we will expand the initiative to the Western Cape."

As Alexander Forbes brings new partners on board – some with available funds, others with expertise and access – the plan is to roll the concept out to more black-owned panel shops.

Ossip said that with the right partners in the industry, in government and among the professional associations, the sky was the limit.

To date Adopt-a-Panel Shop has attracted a number of key stakeholders. All have joined the steering committee and their chief executives invest their time and expertise to help the initiative expand.

Partners include the National African Association of Automobile Service Providers, the Retail Motor Industry Organisation, Sambra, the Umsobomvu Youth Fund and the Nafcoc JCCI.

Ossip said: "Going forward, and working closely with these partners, we will continue sourcing good black-owned panelbeating businesses at various stages of development and invest time and money to help each one to an appropriate Sambra grading level."

Alexander Forbes will encourage clients to bring their cars to these panel shops where appropriate.

"If other key players in the insurance industry do the same, black-owned vehicle repair businesses will thrive, employ more local people and grow and transform this industry – and with it our economy," said Ossip.

**'We will continue sourcing good black-owned panelbeaters'**