

Top award for city woman 'well deserved'

NOSIPHO MNGOMA

A DURBAN woman who has dedicated her life to improving the lives of people with mental health illnesses, has become the first South African to be awarded a prestigious international award.

Gita Harie, executive director of Durban and Coastal Mental Health, received the International Visitor Leadership Programme 2015 Gold Star Alumni award in the US for being a "tireless advocate for persons with mental health challenges".

Speaking to the Daily News yesterday, Harie said she was honoured to have been nominated by the US embassy in South Africa for the award, which this year focused on the NGO sector.

Harie was one of six recipients - all working in non-governmental organisations around the world - recognised earlier this month.

The programme is an initiative of the US department of state, and each year hosts professionals in different sectors from around the world for knowledge exchange visits.

Harie participated in the 1998 exchange, visiting several US cities.

"I was so impressed with the economic integration of people with mental health problems, with the emphasis on self-advocacy skills. I came back and implemented similar projects



Durban and Coastal Mental Health executive director Gita Harie, whose work has helped people with mental illnesses, like Yolanda Botha (right), to live at their full potential. PICTURE: JACQUES NAUDE

at Durban and Coastal Mental Health," she said.

The organisation empowers people through skills training and raising their self-esteem.

A social worker by profession with an honours degree in psychology, Harie has been working at the organisation for 36 years.

"I have a passion for mental health services and believe that through interventions one can make a huge difference to people with psychiatric illnesses and intellectual disabilities, which optimises their

ability and enhances their quality of life."

The organisation has seven residential care and eight child day care centres in Durban and surrounds, hold training workshops.

"Last year alone, we reached 56 000 people to unlock their potential."

She believes there is a need for more public awareness to dispel misconceptions associated with mental illness, which she hopes will stop the stigma and discrimination.

Through her leadership, the

organisation has continued to provide services to some of the most vulnerable people in Durban.

Working with them also helped Harie to be mindful of her own daughters, Janisha and Kashmirira.

"My work taught me patience and empathy for people, so as my daughters grew up, I knew to give them the necessary support while allowing them to make individual choices for their own development," said Harie.

"This actually ensured that they were well-equipped to manage their own lives in the future. They are both married professionals now."

Nurturing

Her daughters were not the only ones to benefit from Harie's nurturing.

Yolanda Botha, 48, who has an intellectual disability, has benefited so greatly from the programmes at the organisation she is now the chairwoman of their advocacy movement.

"Gita is fantastic, she is such an inspiration. I would not be where I am today had it not been for her support," she said, congratulating her boss on the "well deserved" award.

Harie said the award motivated her to keep working towards improving the lives of people, not just in July, which is Mental Health Awareness Month, but every day.