History re-written online in Woodstock

KAREN KOTZE

History is being re-written from within a building in Woodstock. And this is not politically-driven textbook history; it is the history of people, the stories told by unsung heroes who fought for liberation, the stories of grandparents and community that knit together to colour the whole.

Behind the scenes – and pushing – is Omar Badsha, CEO and board member of South African History Online and his team.

South African History Online (SAHO) is a non-partisan people's history project. It was established in June 2000 as a non-profit Section 21 Company. Mr Badsha wants to address the biased manner in which the history and cultural heritage of South Africa (and Africa) has been represented in educational and cultural institutions.

"SAHO's mission is to break the silences about our past and to create a comprehensive online encyclopaedia of South African history and culture that is accessible, involves ordinary South Africans telling their stories, and contributes to the building of a common identity and a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society," he says.

He wants to popularise history and open it up to the younger generations too – but it's not only about that – he sees history as a vital component of education and an interest factor with real value to promote tourism.

Of these, the Lives of Courage and the Liberation Struggle Project, the Hundred Years of Freedom project and the Education Programme top the list.

"We want to support teachers, schools and universities, and we want our young people to know – we want to record the real stories and lives of people who brought about change in the world they live in," Mr Badsha says.

He says SAHO's website is the largest and fastest growing online archive and encyclopaedia of South African history and culture.

■ Back row: Anele Siwa (intern), Jeeva Rajgopaul (researcher), Katie Mooney (researcher), Omar Badsha (CEO) and Mads Norgaard (graphic designer). Front row: Ngqabutho Madida (researcher), Netta Kornberg (intern), Deidre Mackenna (graphic designer), Yonela Sotondoshe (intern) and Cabral Wicht (researcher).

PICTURE: KAREN KOTZE

"The website integrates new technological developments with knowledge production and learning, most notably in our educational and community outreach programmes.

"The links developed in SAHO's educational and community outreach programmes have made us the leading online history website, contributing to the teaching and learning of history in the classroom and the rewriting of history, and providing a platform for ordinary people to contribute to a new South African narrative."

The website is visited by more than a million users every year and offers free, a vast collection of articles, books, images and videos – updated every week by the team of researchers in Woodstock.

He says that SAHO also runs the largest history schools project in the country.

"Through our partnership with the Department of Education, we play a key role in the strengthening of history teaching at schools."

SAHO's projects are broadly divided into "Operational Projects" such as running the online encyclopedia/portal and educational projects, publications, exhibitions and places and community histories.

Special Projects includes various arts and cultural projects which will be co-ordinated by Mr Badsha who is a self-taught, award winning artist and photographer. Mr Badsha founded SAHO and has spear-headed various SAHO projects.

"The rewriting of South African history is a massive undertaking," Mr Badsha grins, but he is happy to tackle it. He wants to achieve SAHO's goal by forging links with local history organisations, universities, museums, libraries and archives. "We have people from all over the world who are interested and support us but we want more local people to turn their hand to it, these are the people with the knowledge and stories we want," he says.

For more details on any of the projects and how to become involved visit www.sahistory.org.za or call 021 447 4365.