



ANNUAL REPORT

1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025



CONTENTS

Message from the Chairperson	2
Message from the Head of Operations	3
Year at a Glance	5
Vision and Mission	6
Theory of Change	7
Our Team	8
Underdog Programmes	9
Highlights and Achievements	11 - 12
Events and Community Engagement	13
Testimonial	14
Challenges and Opportunities	16 - 17
Looking Ahead	18
Financial Overview	20
Thank you and Acknowledgements	21
Contact Information	23

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

I've been involved with The Underdog Project in various capacities for about a decade now (which in and of itself is crazy), and every year we look back at what has been achieved with pride and gratitude. This year was no different, and we have much to celebrate.

At the heart of our organisation always sits our beneficiaries and this year we were privileged to work directly with over 60 youth, from those who entered one of our programmes for the first time, through to those that returned as Peer Leaders or Past Graduates. It's here that we really see the impact that we are able to make – as we move further on from our initial interventions, to delve deeper into developing leadership skills and supporting them in transitioning from school into the workplace.

Then, equally important are the shelter dogs that form an integral part of our work. This year we welcomed over 30 dogs into our programme, many who have since been adopted into loving forever homes.

As we look ahead, we are starting to envisage what comes next and how we grow. We have a vision of taking what we do wider and in doing so, being able to impact and reach many more. We are looking at this taking the form of a mobile unit, and we are currently looking at how to make this a reality.

Driving all of this has been the wonderful operations team, headed up by Michelle and Emily, along with Siya and Eazy. This year has really been one where everyone has stepped into new roles with energy and enthusiasm, and the energy and passion is palpable. Without all of their time and dedication, none of which we show in this report would have been possible.

Lastly, I reflect on the incredible achievement of being awarded as one of the Xero Beautiful Businesses – one of four in South Africa, and 28 winners overall globally. This is awarded to organisations that “despite the facing ongoing challenges... are resilient, ambitious and optimistic”. I think there's no better way to describe The Underdog Project, which continues to grow and blossom, always with a big heart and a wagging tail.

Thank you again to all of our supporter and donors, you really make a difference.

With love,
Emma King
Chairperson.

MESSAGE FROM THE HEAD OF OPERATIONS

As I write this letter, I do so with many thoughts and reflections. This year marked a new chapter for us as we said a heartfelt goodbye to our beloved Managing Director, Nina Greyling, who stepped down after seven years of dedicated and inspiring service. Nina's compassion and vision helped shape The Underdog Project into what it is today, and we remain deeply grateful for the legacy she leaves behind.

In the wake of this change, we restructured internally to build greater resilience and strengthen our team. Our Board of Directors has stepped into a more active role, offering fresh insight and renewed commitment. We also welcomed two new independent contractors: Caron Tomblin as our Grants and Proposal Writer, and Lauran Musgrave as our Bookkeeper. Both have already made a meaningful contribution to our work.

But perhaps the most exciting highlights of the year were the moments shared between our youth and dogs - the heart of what we do. In 2024, we hosted two incredibly special dog shows, giving our youth the opportunity to showcase the training and relationships they've built with their dog teammates. These events were full of pride, teamwork, and celebration, and are a powerful reminder of the growth and healing that happen when young people are given purpose and connection.

Our Peer Leader Programme continued strong, with six dedicated young leaders stepping into mentorship roles, growing in confidence, and supporting others in the group. We also welcomed many new dogs into our sessions, providing them with connection and care, enrichment, and training, and we were overjoyed to see many of them find their forever homes.

These are the moments that remind us why we do what we do.

As we look ahead to the remainder of 2025 and the start of 2026, we do so with renewed energy, deep gratitude, and a profound belief in the power of the human-animal connection and its impact on the individual, and through them to the wider community. Thank you to every supporter, partner, volunteer, and team member who has walked alongside us this year. Your kindness makes this work possible.

With love and gratitude,

Michelle Smith



YEAR AT A GLANCE

1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025

Youth Impact

- **62 youth** completed our structured programmes
- Developed skills in empathy, emotional regulation, and leadership
- Many returned as Peer Leaders or joined the Past Graduate stream

Rescue Dogs

- **30+ shelter dogs** supported through socialisation and enrichment
- Many successfully adopted into loving homes

Leadership & Growth

- **Xero Beautiful Business Fund** Country Winner for the category Strengthening Community Connection. R250 000 awarded.
- Interns like Siya & Eazy led full sessions, mentoring others

Community & Events

- **Golf Day** raised R80,000
- **Mandela Day Auction** brought in R180,391
- **Quiz Nights** and **Padel for Paws** are ongoing fundraisers and continue to bring new supporters

Inclusion & Access

- Partnerships with **CAFDA School of Skills** and **Dominican School for the Deaf**
- New therapeutic sessions and outreach formats introduced

VISION

Connecting at risk youth and shelter dogs through creative and supportive educational programmes: teaching and imparting positive reinforcement dog training techniques, instilling life skills, and promoting humane education in a network of classrooms run by empowered graduated beneficiaries.

The Underdog Project aims to create a ripple effect of positive social change throughout South Africa within a sustainable, growing organisation, benefitting all stakeholders.

MISSION

Create safe, supportive spaces where vulnerable youth and shelter dogs connect through structured, humane education. Through hands-on learning, empathy-building, and responsibility, we equip young people with the life skills, confidence, and resilience they need to thrive; while giving dogs a second chance at trust, care, and companionship.



THEORY OF CHANGE

1. INPUTS



- Rescue dogs from partner shelters
- At-risk youth from under-resourced areas
- Skilled facilitators, peer leaders, counsellors
- Tools for positive reinforcement & humane education
- Partnerships with schools & community organisations.
- Support from donors and funders

2. ACTIVITIES



- 10-12 week Youth Builder programmes
- Peer Leader training & mentoring
- Past Graduate progression pathway
- Therapeutic & special intervention sessions
- Outreach & school-based sessions
- Fundraising and community events

4. OUTCOMES



Youth

- Greater empathy, confidence, and self-regulation
- Stronger communication and leadership skills
- Sense of belonging and positive identity
- Connection to mentors and safe role models

Dogs

- Lower stress and better behaviour
- Comfort with people and new settings
- More attention and enrichment

Community

- Better awareness of animal and social justice
- Increased empathy across generations and species
- More volunteering and civic pride

3. OUTPUTS



- Youth engaged and learning new skills
- Dogs socialised, trained, and calmer
- Peer Leaders actively co-facilitating
- More weekly sessions and wider reach
- Self-esteem and communication modules added
- Increased community involvement

5. LONG-TERM IMPACT



- Resilient, skilled, purpose-driven young adults
- Fewer youth at risk of harmful behaviour
- More dogs adopted into loving homes
- Stronger, kinder, more connected communities
- Scalable, mobile model reaching new areas

THE UNDERDOG TEAM

OPERATIONAL STAFF



**MICHELLE
SMITH**



**EMILY
SMITH**



**SPHELELE
KHUZWAYO**



**SIYAMTHANDA
GQOMANI**

BOARD MEMBERS



**CHAIRPERSON
EMMA KING**



**TREASURER
RONEL VAN DIJK**



**SECRETARY
KERI PADDOCK**



**FOUNDER
JENNA DA SILVA PINTO**



**MEMBER
LINKA CAMERON**

PROGRAMMES

Youth Builder

Our core programme offers a safe, uplifting space where youth connect meaningfully with shelter dogs. Through hands-on training, they build trust, responsibility, and compassion; while developing key life skills like emotional intelligence, communication, and confidence. This structured, supportive environment encourages personal growth and resilience.

Past Graduate

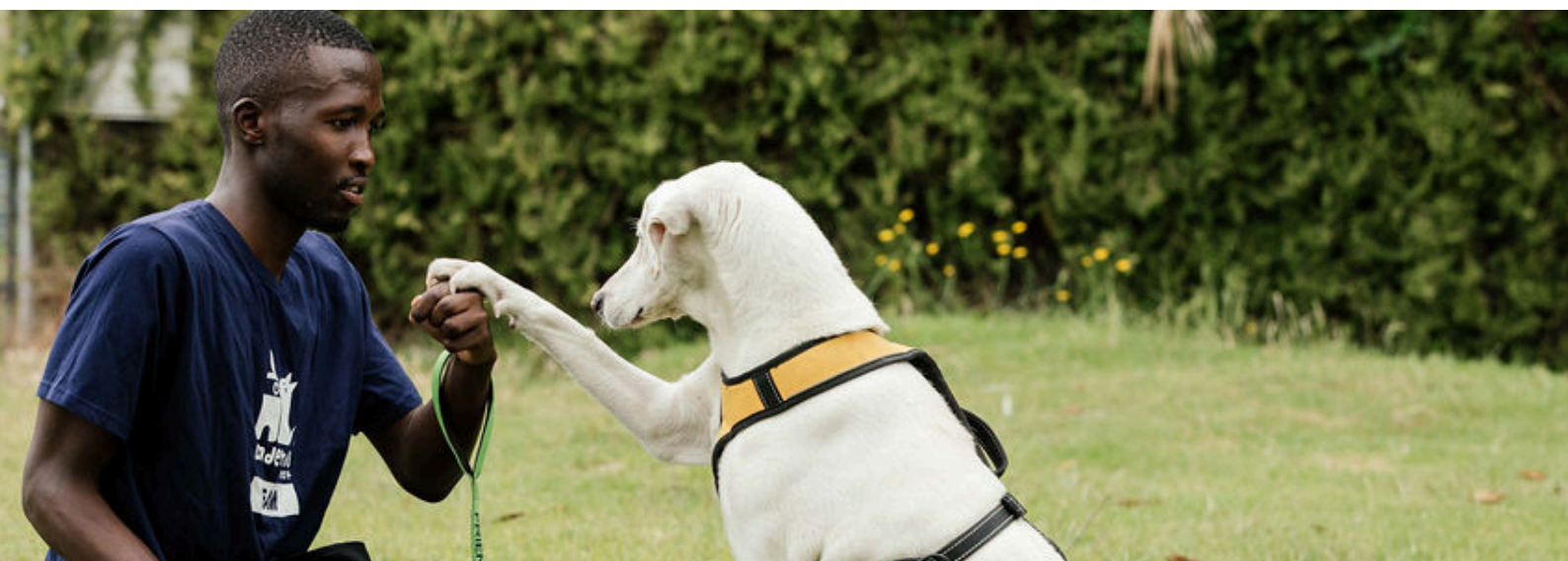
Follows on from our flagship programme with an introduction to leadership and 21st century life skills training, and advanced dog training.

Peer Leader

Follows the Past Graduate programme with a practical application of leadership and 21st century life skills, along with support in the transition from school into the workforce.

Therapeutic Interventions

Children/youth are referred to us by psychologists/counsellors through behavioural centres and complete a version of our Youth Builder that we adapt to fit the needs of the individual.





HIGHLIGHTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

It has been a vibrant, action-packed year filled with growth, resilience, and impact. Both for the young people we serve and the dogs we work with. Here are some of the moments that stood out:



We were honoured to be named a **Xero Beautiful Business Fund** Country Winner, receiving R250,000 to support the continued growth and development of our Peer Leader Programme. This international recognition has boosted our visibility, morale, and impact trajectory

- **62 youth participated** in our structured programmes, developing emotional resilience, communication skills, and empathy through hands-on training and bonding with shelter dogs.
- **Over 30 rescue dogs** were supported through regular positive reinforcement training, socialisation, and positive human interaction. Many have since been adopted into loving homes, with our youth playing a direct role in their transformation.
- The **Peer Leader programme is thriving**, with graduates stepping into active roles as co-facilitators. These youth now help run sessions, offering mentorship and guidance to new participants while reinforcing their own confidence and leadership.
- **We welcomed our second intern**, Siya (a graduate of our programme) onto the Operational Team, strengthening our commitment to youth development and leadership growth.
- **Siya & Eazy**, our two Interns, led full sessions with supervision this year - an incredible milestone in our model that reflects the deep trust, growth, and capacity our young people are gaining.



- Programme partnerships with **CAFDA School of Skills** and **Dominican School for the Deaf** broadened our inclusivity, allowing us to reach a more diverse group of participants and tailor our facilitation style to meet different communication needs.
- **Expanded Session Access:** We introduced two new weekly sessions to increase the number of youth we reach and offer more consistent engagement.
- **Peer-Led Communication Training:** We piloted two sessions focused on digital communication - specifically email and WhatsApp etiquette. This is in direct response to the increasing need for professional and digital literacy.
- **Self-Esteem Pilot Programme:** We launched a pilot with eight adolescent boys focused on confidence-building and managing stress - vital emotional and behavioural skills that also improve dog training outcomes.
- **Creative Enrichment:** Youth and graduates worked collaboratively to design and introduce three new scent-based enrichment games for the dogs. These activities support canine mental stimulation while reinforcing the youth's role as capable, empathetic trainers.

EVENTS & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We love bringing people together, and our events this year did just that. They helped raise much-needed funds, but also sparked connection, built awareness, and gave the wider community a real feel for what Underdog is all about.



- **Our Golf Day** at Royal Cape Golf Club raised approximately R80,000, bringing together supporters, volunteers, and friends of Underdog in a joyful and generous show of solidarity.
- **The Mandela Day Auction** brought in R183 910, with donors, artists, and the community rallying around our work and the powerful stories behind it.
- Our monthly **Quiz Nights** and **Padel for Paws**, continue to grow, bringing people together in fun, participatory ways that not only raise vital funds for The Underdog Project, but also attract volunteers, expand our network, and generate energy and excitement around the work we do.
- **End-of-Year Dog Show:** This celebratory event brought together participants, families, and community members to recognise the progress of youth and their dog partners a joyful and affirming way to end the year.

TESTIMONIAL

Dear Emily, Michelle, and the Underdog Team

As 2024 draws to a close, we want to express our heartfelt gratitude for the incredible impact you've had on our learners. Your innovative therapy program, harnessing the unique power of dogs, has been a game-changer for children who struggle with low self-esteem.

Each term, a small group of learners embarked on a 10-week journey with you, starting as shy, withdrawn individuals. However, through your professionalism, patience, care, and the unique power of canine therapy, our learners emerged with positive development and became more self-assured. By the end of the programme, we saw remarkable transformations. These teenagers gained confidence, developed resilience, and learned to stand tall in the face of challenges, such as bullying.

Their newfound sense of self-worth and uplifting growth in identity have enhanced their participation at school and their ability to navigate life's hurdles with strength and optimism. The growth these learners have shown is a testament to your dedication, patience, and care. You have reminded us all that with the right support, every child can flourish. Your work has not only uplifted our learners but also inspired their teachers and families. The impact of your programme extends beyond the individual learners. It has brought hope and inspiration to teachers and parents alike, reminding us all of the profound difference compassion and innovation can make. Your commitment has been a shining example of what it means to invest in the future, one child at a time.

Looking ahead to 2025, we eagerly anticipate continuing this invaluable partnership. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to making a difference. With the year drawing to a close, we hope you take some well-deserved time to rest, recharge, and reflect on the incredible work you've accomplished. We look forward to sending more learners to benefit from your care and expertise in the New Year.

Thank you once again for the unwavering dedication, empathy, and skill you bring to your work. You are changing lives in ways that words cannot fully express, and we are privileged to have you as part of our learners' journey.

May you enjoy a restful and well-deserved holiday, and we look forward to seeing the magic you bring to the next group of learners.

Mrs. N. Saferdien
(Deputy Principal, CAFDA SOS)



CHALLENGES



While 2024 brought significant achievements, it also highlighted several internal and external challenges that we are actively working to address. Some of these relate to capacity, while others point to the need for stronger systems and clearer strategic direction as we grow:

- Staffing transitions created temporary gaps in leadership and institutional memory.
- Limited internal capacity continues to affect proposal development and long-term fundraising planning.
- Our monthly supporter campaign is growing slowly, and digital platforms like the website and LinkedIn are underutilised.
- Time constraints remain a persistent challenge, making it difficult to prioritise strategic development while still delivering core programmes.
- Our current shelter lease lacks formal agreement, introducing a level of operational uncertainty.

OPPORTUNITIES



At the same time, the year has opened new doors that align with our mission and offer real potential for growth. We're entering 2025 with a stronger foundation, expanded networks, and clear areas to deepen our impact—especially around mentoring boys, developing peer leaders, mobilising our reach, and improving our M&E. These opportunities include:

- Building on the momentum of the Peer Leader programme, creating clear pathways from participant to intern facilitator.
- Expanding our reach through mobile partnerships, taking our programmes into new communities.
- Leveraging our credibility as the Xero Beautiful Business Fund Country Winner, which has boosted our visibility and trust.
- Deepening our unique strength in working with young men, particularly those lacking positive male role models
- Strengthening our Monitoring and Evaluation systems to better capture psychosocial outcomes and support learning, adaptation, and donor reporting.
- Development of the Underdog Toolkit as a potential revenue-generating and scaling mechanism.
- Growing appetite for innovative, animal-assisted therapeutic interventions.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we look ahead, we're excited to be developing a new idea that brings us closer to a long-held vision:

Reaching more youth and dogs with the heart of Underdog's work. While we had previously imagined expansion through a second fixed classroom, we're now shaping a more practical and flexible model - a mobile Underdog Outreach unit that can travel to partner sites.

This mobile model is still in development, and we are actively putting together proposals to pilot the idea. The concept involves a small, skilled team bringing Underdog sessions directly to shelter dogs and young people in under-resourced communities. It's a way to grow thoughtfully, grounded in community need and built on trust, without the overhead of permanent infrastructure.

Alongside this exciting direction, 2025-2026 will also focus on:

- Expanding our Peer Leader Programme, offering progression and leadership opportunities to alumni youth.
- Strengthening our therapeutic intervention work with children and youth referred through schools, counsellors, and social workers.
- Investing in team development and fundraising systems to support long-term sustainability
- Deepening our focus on boys and young men, especially those from underserved communities where stable male role models are often absent. We've consistently seen powerful transformation in the young men we work with, and are committed to building on this impact.

We're also refining how we measure our impact, with a strong focus on improving our Monitoring and Evaluation systems. This includes tracking psychosocial and life skills outcomes more effectively, allowing us to learn, adapt, and better communicate the value of our work to funders and partners.

With bold ideas taking shape and a clear commitment to thoughtful, community-rooted growth, 2025-2026 promises to be a year of innovation, deepening impact, and exciting possibilities.



FINANCIALS

Overview of financials 1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025

INCOME	2025	2024
Donations	R 611,969.00	R 642,838.00
Grants	R 506,300.00	R 20,000.00
Events	R 496,012.00	R 355,623.00
Other	R 19,468.00	R 13,532.00
TOTAL	R 1,633,749.00	R 1,031,993.00
EXPENSES		
Salaries & Wages	R 827,947.00	R 790,383.00
Fundraising events	R 73,859.00	R 117,623.00
Purchase of Merchandise	R 23,889.00	R 4,381.00
Workshops	R 7,128.00	R 27,628.00
Catering	R 34,509.00	R 26,097.00
Transport	R 31,367.00	R 19,810.00
Depreciation	R 22,109.00	R 22,109.00
Session Expenses	R 15,718.00	R 11,660.00
Classroom Expenses	R 14,371.00	R 17,006.00
Stationary	R 2,779.00	R 1,149.00
Bank Charges	R 13,175.00	R 3,552.00
Other	R 28,964.00	R 41,291.00
TOTAL	R 1,095,815.00	R 1,082,689.00
Surplus/(Shortfall)	R 537,934.00	-R 50,696.00

THANK YOU & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With heartfelt gratitude to every individual, business, and foundation who believed in our mission this year. You are the reason we can continue doing this work.

Thank you to our major donors and supporters, including the **Paddocks** and the **Mordaunt Foundation**, your generosity and belief in our vision continue to fuel what we do. To the **Xero Beautiful Business Fund**, thank you for recognising the heart of our work; the funding received has played a crucial role in strengthening our Peer Leader programme as we look ahead to 2025.

We are also incredibly grateful to our Padel for Paws community, Golf Day sponsors and players, and all those who donated to or bid in our annual auction. To the amazing folks who show up with such spirit at our Quiz Nights, and our dedicated monthly supporters, thank you for helping us build momentum and joy around our mission.

And to our cherished volunteers, who bring heart, time, and hands-on support to every corner of our work - we see you, and we thank you.

Special thanks as well to our partners at **CAFDA School of Skills** and the **Dominican School for the Deaf** and the **Positive Behaviour Resource Intervention Centre (PBIRC)** for your trust and collaboration.

**From all of us at The Underdog Project:
Thank you. Baie dankie. Enkosi.**





CONTACT US

Please reach out to ask any questions, make any comments or offer any suggestions. We'd love to hear from you!



www.underdogproject.org



072 848 9892



mail@underdogproject.org



@the_underdog_project_ct



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The Underdog Project

THANKS FOR READING

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