

# Partners' path of destruction

**C**ONVICTED murderer, Vuyani "Vivi" Mthembu, 23, released on early parole last year, became the leader of a Durban hijacking syndicate within weeks of walking out of Westville prison.

By the time Mthembu and his childhood friend, 19-year-old Spehele Shezi, were killed in an alleged gunfight with police on January 6, the two had been linked to 21 cases of hijacking, attempted murder and armed robbery.

The pair were, according to police, the leaders of a hijacking gang that targeted women dropping off children at schools and creches in the Pinetown and New Germany areas.

But the Department of Correctional Services claims that Mthembu had been "complying 100 percent with his parole conditions", including that he stay at his family's home in Clermont from Monday to Thursday, with free hours for shopping on Saturdays and to attend church on Sundays.

"If he was not going to be available at home, he would phone the supervisor, making another arrangement for the consultation," said Correctional Services spokeswoman, Nokuthula Zikhali.

However, an investigation by the Durban-based agency, Roving Reporters, has since found that prison authorities wholly failed to monitor what Mthembu got up to after his release from prison for the murder of 14-year-old William Hammond on October 2, 2002.

Mthembu was also 14 at the time and Shezi just 11, when they attacked and stabbed Hammond and Derek Meldrun, 12, while trying to rob them of their bicycles.

In 2006 Mthembu was sent to jail for seven years. Shezi was given a three-year jail sentence, suspended for five years in view of his age.

After Mthembu served only half his prison sentence, he was released and linked up again with his cousin and childhood friend, Shezi.

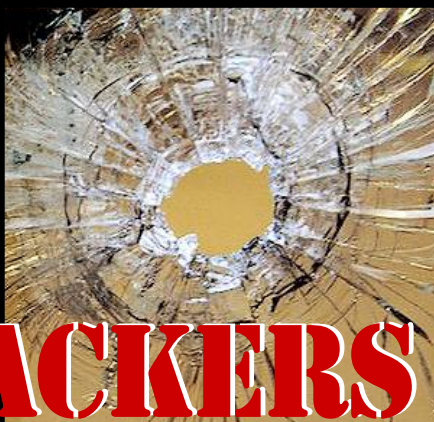
Soon the two were hijacking cars – plenty of them.

"Eish, there were so many

He carried an Okapi knife at primary school, murdered a boy when he was 14 and became an expert hijacker – ending up in a bodybag in January this year. This is the story of Vuyani 'Vivi' Mthembu, part of a Roving Reporters case study by Durban University of Technology students Sabelo Nsele, Sandile Gumede and Joel Burton supervised by award-winning journalist Fred Kockott.

## TALE OF TWO HIJACKERS PART 1

PART 2 TOMORROW



October last year. While Vuyisile and Thulani do not believe that their brother and cousin were involved in the Bond murders, nor all of the other cases the police pinned on them, they do concede that the two were running a small-time hijacking syndicate, becoming household names in Clermont, often driving about in hijacked vehicles.

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## His fate was predicted

THE people of Clermont – a lively and bustling Durban township to some, a gangsters' den to others – reckoned Vuyani "Vivi" Mthembu would not see in 2011 and his second child being born.

Mthembu was on the run from police, wanted for a series of hijackings he had committed alongside his childhood partner in crime, Spehele Shezi, 19 – his accomplice in the William Hammond murder.

Strangely, while on the run from police, Mthembu kept in touch with correctional services' parole officers who were monitoring his conduct after his early release on parole for the Hammond murder.

For weeks on end, Mthembu and Shezi managed to evade justice before they were finally shot dead by police on January 6 this year.

A picture of Vivi now hangs alongside a picture of his late father, Dumisani Mbikwana, in the family's small home in Hammarsdale.

It was here that Vivi was born on December 9, 1987. A time of escalating political violence as supporters of the United Democratic Front, the internal wing of the then banned ANC, tried to oust supporters of the IFP from Hammarsdale, and vice versa.

With schooling badly affected, the Mthembus moved to Clermont.

Thulani, 33, the eldest son, has fond memories of those days.

He recalls Vivi, then a toddler, falling down a small flight of stairs, picking himself up at the bottom, and then declaring: "I amst fell."

"He was a very, very happy child," said Thulani.

Thulani said there were no traumatic incidents he could remember from his brother's childhood.

Then their younger cousin from Pietermaritzburg, Spehele Shezi, moved in with the family to attend school in Clermont.

Spehele, said Thulani, became his brother's "number one companion".

He said the pair got up to a lot of mischief, as any normal, growing boys do.

But at school, mischief started taking on a dark side, the two boys becoming knife-wielding nuisances.

"Once, when Vivi was in Standard Six (Grade 8), I took his knife out his shorts pocket. After that he used to hide it away from us, but he would still turn up with a knife at school," said Thulani.

Then came the day that Thulani still refers to as "that accident with the white boy" – the murder of William Hammond.

Although Mthembu family members do not speak openly about this, they do not deny that their father, Dumisani Mbikwana, was a convicted car thief, his life also complicated by having sired 39 (acknowledged) children from a string of lovers and common-law wives.

In Mbikwana's world, to eat was to steal, and for two young boys growing up under his care, robbing white kids of bikes was a stepping stone into this world; murder a qualification that earned respect.

As the trial magistrate, KQ Hadebe, would later remark, the two accused had paraded around court as if they had committed a heroic deed.

They say that justice delayed is justice denied. The Hammond murder case was no exception. It took four years, and four different prosecutors, before the court was finally able to pronounce a guilty verdict in October 2006.

By this time, Vivi's mother, Nelisiwe Mthembu, a domestic servant, had died of cancer. Then, while Vivi was in prison, his father was murdered outside the Nice and Easy tavern in Clermont's 23rd Street.

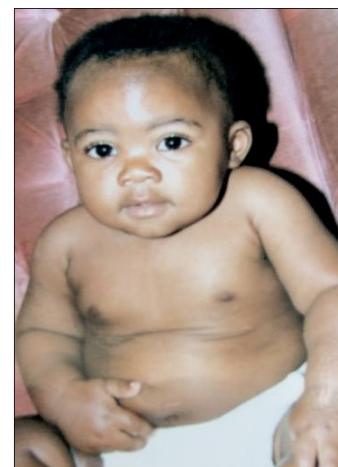
Let out of prison to attend the funeral, Vivi impressed those who gathered to pay their last respects.

"He read out a letter beside his father's coffin," said Vivi's aunt, Sibongile Mbikwana.

"As I saw it, he was a changed person, who had matured and also accepted Christ,



FOND MEMORIES: Thulani Mthembu outside the home where the family and his brother, Vuyani, lived



INNOCENT: Vuyani as a baby



HAPPIER TIMES: Vuyani, in khaki pants, and Vuyisile, in white dress, at a party.



DUMISANI Mbikwana, Vuyani's father.

so I do not know what went wrong after he came out."

"Yes, the odd thing is," said Thulani, "that whenever we visited him in jail, Vivi always told us: 'Ay guys, don't do crime, bra. In jail there is nothing for you. Your life stops in jail. Jail gets you to do things you never thought you would.'"

Thulani said his brother had earned respect among inmates. "Everyone would greet him 'Mhlonishwa! Mhlonishwa!'", he said.

Literally, *Mhlonishwa* means, "sir", but in township gangster culture it's also a title that goes with the swag of carrying knives, going to prison, and driving stolen cars.

Thulani said for the first few weeks after Vivi was released from prison, his brother had stayed at home, abiding by his parole conditions.

"Vivi was always asking me for money. I would give him some to go and buy food when I was not there," he said.

"Then one day Vivi came home with a black bakkie. I asked him where he got it. He said he stole it. Then I saw the keys in the ignition. I moved away, saying he could not have just stolen it. That's when he admitted to hijacking somebody," said Thulani.

Thulani said he had once asked his brother to hand himself over to police at the request of an investigating officer.

cer, Sergeant Lindani Mhlongo, also known as Venter.

"They met at the station commissioner's office in Pinetown. I don't know what was discussed, but Vivi wasn't arrested. I think he was warned that there were cases against him," said Thulani.

But this did not deter Vivi, who was soon driving around the streets of Clermont in hijacked cars.

"Everyone, everywhere was talking and posting messages on Mxit, saying: 'What does he think he is? Vivi is going to die soon!' Police were now hunting him. People were saying Vivi was on a list."

Thulani said when he asked his brother about all this, and carrying a gun, an argument would ensue. Vivi, he said, would say: "Bra, stop it. I will leave now, because you are trying to lecture me?"

Thulani said he had once arrived home to find the place had been raided by police.

"Police had broken the door down to get in. They'd gone through everything, leaving the place a mess and two television sets broken," said Thulani.

He said on another occasion – after the shooting of a neighbour, Delisile Ngubane, 52 – police had swarmed into his house, immediately handcuffing him.

"They dragged me about the place assaulting me. One of them was saying 'You'll see what will happen to you now'. I thought I was going to die. It was actually Venter (Mhlongo) who saved me," said Thulani.

Mhlongo confirmed this: "They actually mistook Thulani for Vivi. Everyone was calling me, saying, 'We've got Vivi! We've got Vivi! Come, come, come!', but the informer had already told me he was not there."

Thulani said after the shooting at the Ngubane home, Vivi had seldom spent more than five minutes at home.

"He would sometimes come by and give me maybe about R100 and tell me to buy food," said Thulani. "I would ask him where he is going, and he would say: 'Ay bru, don't worry about that. I will see you when I come back.'"

Then came the day Vivi never came back – January 6.

"We had slept over at my girlfriend's place," said Thulani. "It was about 8.30am that he left. I could see something was bothering him. I asked him: 'What's wrong? Where you going?'"

Again his brother said: "Ay bru, don't worry. I will call you."

"Later, around 12, I got a call from friends. Venter (Mhlongo) had called them, asking them to tell me that Vivi and Spehele were dead, that I need to come and identify their bodies."

"When I arrived, they were on the ground, in the dirt. Not in the car.

"Spehele had all these parts of his face missing, and half of his mouth, torn off.

"Vivi was lying like he was sleeping. He had a hole in the back of his neck, and on top of his head."

"I met Venter there. He said: 'They didn't want to surrender, bra.'"

I told him: "Bra, it's done. What has happened is finished. Everybody has been talking about it for a long time."

## 'I held my friend's body in my arms': victim

ON OCTOBER 2, 2002, William Hammond, 14, was murdered in a fight over a bicycle on a grassy patch on the roadside near a traffic circle in New Germany, Durban.

Derek Meldrun, now 21, has vivid recollections of the day his neighbour and friend died.

Meldrun was 12 at the time. His mother had offered to make pancakes, and he and William cycled to nearby shops to buy ingredients – milk, flour and marshmallows, accompanied by a friend, Zane Jackman.

On the way to the shops, they passed a group of six township boys.

"Zane got a flat tyre, and had started walking back," said Meldrun.

Jackman would later tell Meldrun how the township boys stopped him, inspected his bicycle, but did not attempt to take it. "I imagine that was because it had a flat tyre," said Meldrun.

When Hammond and Meldrun returned, hot and tired, pushing their bikes up the hill, they were attacked without warning near the traffic circle opposite the New Germany Sports Club.

"This one guy, he basically just came up and *sommer* stabbed me in the arse twice, like it was a warning to say: 'If you don't give me your bike, there will be more stabbing.'"

"I let my bicycle go, but William, his attitude was like: 'Stuff this!'"

"He lost it and went to these two guys, punching and kicking them. Then he just dropped," said Meldrun.

"At first I did not know what had happened. William was shuddering, struggling down his shirt. It was a blue shirt," said Meldrun.

"I ran up the road. There was a surgery there – a Dr Singh I think it was – and shouted: 'Call the doctor, please. We need help!'"

Back at the murder scene, Meldrun held Hammond's body in his arms until the doctor came. "It was just like sitting there crying, holding him," said Meldrun.

## School hijackers shot dead

Linked to 21 attacks

DANIEL THOMAS

THE two men were spotted in a VW Polo that was taken from Clarendon last month. Despite attempts by police to track them, they spent three days and spent money on mobile phones. An officer, Shezi, shot, who had been tracking the hijackers, was killed when they returned to the police.

One of the suspects, Vuyi Mthembu, 23, was on parole after serving time for the murder of a child in New Germany. Mthembu and the other alleged hijacker, Spehele Shezi, 19, had been wanted for several robberies and hijackings in Pinetown, Clarendon, Clarendon and other areas over the past few months, said police spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Vuyisile Mhlongo.

The hijacking was reported to police on Monday and a search for the hijackers was launched. Police are searching for the other hijacker, who is believed to be a 19-year-old, who was shot in the back of the head near Clarendon.

Members of the Pinetown Chapter of the National Alliance – a far-right group – were reported to have been involved in the hijacking and were seen carrying a rifle and a handgun. The hijackers were shot dead by police on Monday.

(Officers say the two men were spotted in a VW Polo that was taken from Clarendon last month.)



Vuyi Mthembu (in red) next to a stolen vehicle near Clarendon. He was shot while exchanging fire with police.

**SAD MEMORY:** Derek Meldrun remembers the events which led to the death of his friend, William Hammond, stabbed by Vuyani Mthembu.



**LEFT:** How the Daily News, on January 7 this year, reported the deaths of Vuyani Mthembu and Spehele Shezi.

hear what had happened.

Two of the boys told the court that Mthembu had instructed Spehele to first confront Meldrun. When Hammond had come to his friend's rescue, Mthembu stabbed him in the chest.

The knife pierced Hammond's heart and he dropped dead on the spot.

Pinetown regional magistrate KQ Hadebe described the case as the most disturbing she had ever ruled on, particularly given the age of those involved.

Even more disconcerting was that in the course of the trial, Mthembu and Shezi had continued along criminal paths, on one occasion getting caught in a hijacked vehicle.

When this was brought to the court's attention in late 2005, the boys were put back in custody at Westville Prison's juvenile facility.

In passing sentence, Hadebe said the two accused had never shown any remorse. Instead, they had conducted themselves as if the killing was "some kind of heroic deed", she said.

And the saddest part of it all, she added, was that Hammond's parents had never "heard a word of sorry, neither from the accused themselves, nor from their parents, nor anyone else involved".

Mthembu was convicted of

"When the doctor came, I ran home. When I saw my mom, I could hardly speak," said Meldrun.

When changing out of his bloodied clothes, he discovered Chappies he had bought, in his back pocket stuck together with congealing blood from wounds in his right buttock.

"I'd forgotten I'd been stabbed too," said Meldrun.

Returning to the murder scene with his mother, Meldrun said he did not want to believe that his friend was dead. Meldrun was stitched up in the back of an ambulance.

By this time an extensive manhunt for the six township boys was under way in neighbouring Clermont township.

"My friend's stepdad, a cop back then, brought one of guys they caught and let me

identify him," said Meldrun.

It turned out to be the boy who had first attacked Meldrun, stabbing him in the buttocks. His name was Spehele Shezi, then 11.

Soon five other township kids would also be in custody. Among them, Shezi's older cousin, Vivi Mthembu, then 14.

Mthembu's sister, Vuyisile, 12 then, recalls that fateful day.

"I was walking from home to the shops. I saw some of Vivi's friends were running like it was nobody's business. I asked: 'What's going on?'"

Vuyisile said she was told her brother had stabbed a white boy.

"I was like, thinking: 'My brother? Stabbed someone? No, what's going on here?'"

The Pinetown Regional Magistrate's Court would later

### The stakeout

In Part 2 tomorrow, read about Mthembu's final showdown with the police

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