

We Like This Guy!

Book Smarts

Becoming a bestselling author turned South African Richard Mason into a big-time giver.

By Deidre Donnelly

 **HE BECAME A** literary celebrity in his first year of study at Oxford University, when the novel he wrote at 18 was published to much hype. As *The Drowning People* won a major European book award (Italy's Grinzane Cavour) and got translated, Richard Mason's name and image were splashed across the international papers.

But it wasn't all praise and pride: Mason faced his fair share of criticism from reviewers, and the gruelling publicity schedule proved too much for someone with the sensitivities that come with bipolar disorder. When one reviewer wrote that he wished Mason had killed himself as well as many of his characters, it touched a nerve: In 1988, when Mason was 10, his sister Kay, 24, committed suicide due to bipolar depression. Struck by panic attacks, lethargy and extreme sadness, Mason wondered whether he was spinning out of control, as his sister had. He also realised that he shared something else with his sister – a commitment to South Africa. As soon as he felt better, he decided, he would honour her legacy by using the proceeds from *The Drowning People* to benefit his country. "It was the first time I really had something to give," Mason explains. And for him, the way forward is in education.

Leading the Way

The Kay Mason Foundation (KMF), based in the Western Cape, helps underprivileged parents of promising students send their children to the best schools possible. But Mason's vision extends beyond helping individuals. It's about facing the future with optimism. "We're trying to create a network of leaders," he says. "So we don't only select the kids with the best marks. We look for those who have that spark that makes us think, You could get something done."

Since their first intake of four students in 1999, KMF has put over 100 kids through school. Mason says, "We haven't really even seen the miracle unfold yet. When

these kids become lawyers and bankers and politicians, they'll remember the people who didn't have the chances they had, and they'll be focused on doing something about it."

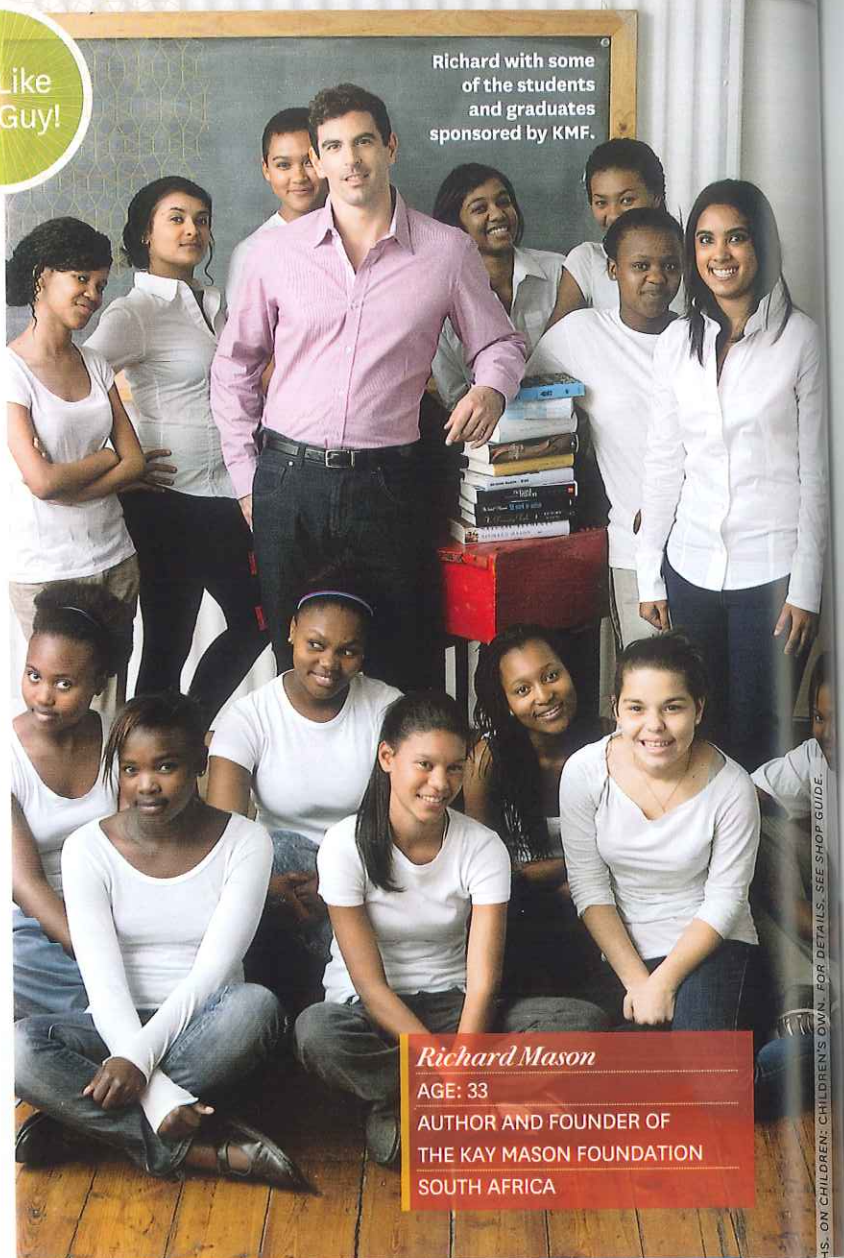
Future Forward

Now, with Lulutho – a self-funded 36-hectare development project in the rural Tunga Valley, Eastern Cape – Mason has taken his mission to community level. The plan is not only to uplift the community, but to use Lulutho as a base for eco camps. "I want to help all South African teens to consider ways to solve climate change and poverty."

"Everyone has something to give," Mason adds with confidence. "When I started KMF, I just thought it was the right thing to do. I had no idea how much joy it would bring me." 

For more information, visit kaymasonfoundation.org and richard-mason.org

Richard with some of the students and graduates sponsored by KMF.



Richard Mason

AGE: 33

AUTHOR AND FOUNDER OF
THE KAY MASON FOUNDATION
SOUTH AFRICA