

Curating 'creativism' and wearing it forward with the Mal Foundation

By Leigh Andrews

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Net#work BBDO's Mike Schalit founded the not-for-profit Make a Life (Mal) Foundation a while ago as a banner for initiatives that use creativity for good. Here, Schalit and Mal designer-in-chief Emma Strydom explain how their recent t-shirt designs have benefitted the Seed library initiative and more.



Mike Schalit, Anthony Kawitzky (Marlboro Originals), Clinton Mtri (COO at BBDO South Africa), Emma Strydom. Images supplied.

Mike Schalit is a busy man. In addition to his 9-5 as creative co-founder and creative chief of BBDO SA Group, he also extends his creative energy beyond the deadlines imposed inside the agency to all aspects of creativity.

[Urban Dictionary](#), known for sometimes dodgy definitions, gets its right in this case:

Creativist: Noun - (1) To be a creative activist. (2) To challenge conventionality using art and expressionism as your tools. (3) To creatively enact change.

Strydom, too is a creative force to be reckoned with, having crafted and designed the agency's *Creative#Director* (#CD) limited-edition coffee table book.



Net#work BBDO to launch limited edition book on creativity

2 Aug 2017



Here, Schalit elaborates on how Mal got started with Strydom sharing how her eight grey and white local t-shirt designs produced by Marlboro Originals were designed as a way of "wearing it forward" as the ideal of "creativism" gains momentum...

▣ **Let's start at the beginning, with the background story of Mal.**

Schalit: Mal is a philosophy – *Make a Living. Make a Life.* It's not just a product of idealism, but rather a crazy mission to give back through creativity. We make a living by what we get – We make a life by what we give. You've got to be a bit *Mal* down here in South Africa. There's an onslaught, whether it's environmental, politics, the haves and have-nots, especially in our rainbow nation where there is a huge imbalance. So we plough back into our community and our projects. There's no limit to the difference we can make with our talents.

Ever since I co-founded ad agency Net#work in May 1994, being part of the new democracy forged a passion to explore new models and a new spirit of putting back, so there has always been an idealistic edge to our ideas: “making more than ads – making a difference.”



Non-profit creative agency launched

5 Aug 2010



We hit the sweet spot when we pioneered the world's first solar-panelled billboard for Nedbank, which not only changed lives and the media landscape but was also awarded the Cannes Grand Prix and sowed the seeds for the notion of 'goodvertising', which has now become an accepted pillar of the industry – creativity for good. This inspired us to setting up our very own non-profit Mal Foundation.

▣ **Wow. How does the Seed library fit into that?**

Schalit: Education is holding everything back – you only have to look at our current political leadership. Then you see the facts, like only 8% of public schools have a functional library, so no small wonder there is a lack of imagination and inspiration out there – but that doesn't mean we have to accept it. We can redesign a better future through ideas.

The Seed library project is all about understanding that our children need stimulation, especially in disadvantaged communities. If you want to encourage reading and learning, use design to inspire. Colours, vibrance, light and creativity are at the heart of our libraries as even the most impoverished kid will not be excited by a dour, sterile container with some books in it. If you start out in a cell, you'll probably end up in one. Let's create an exciting new ambition – the next generation of imagination.



Net#work BBDO opens two more school libraries

16 Nov 2017



Accordingly, Seed has evolved into an effective and award-winning initiative that is growing stronger every day, with the 11th and 12th ones having launched on Monday, 13 November in Thembisa and Soshanguve. The initiative was brought to

life by Mal along with various partners including Shout SA, Breadline Africa, Architects of Justice, Lead SA and corporate sponsors including Chicken Licken, Pick n Pay and Exclusive Books.

■ **Truly bringing the nation together for a good purpose. On that note, talk us through how Emma got involved in designing the T-shirts produced by Marlboro Originals and what sparked the designs.**

Schalit: It all started with 140BBDO'S I Get Paid For This market at First Thursdays in Cape Town.



Seeding the First Thursdays creative spirit with BBDO

1 Feb 2017



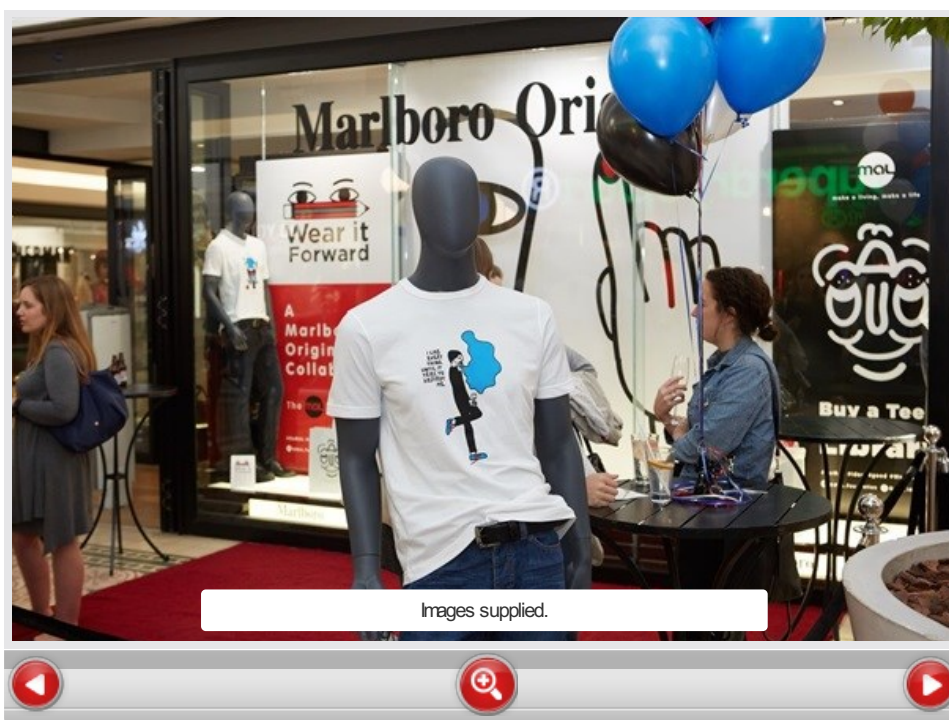
I Get Paid For This is a creative outlet, making rad designed products of all sorts where all the proceeds of the sales of the goods go to the Seed library project. Emma led the charge at First Thursdays and is now the Mal designer-in-chief. She describes creativism as action through creativity.

“ Our designs and projects are about collaboration, co-creation, co-habiting with brands and consumers for a more equitable society and sustainable future. It's about the duality of giving and getting. ”

But still having fun doing it, being bold and brave. The owner of Marlboro, Anthony Kawitzky, was passing by and was so taken up by the cheeky designs he approached us to collaborate right there and then!

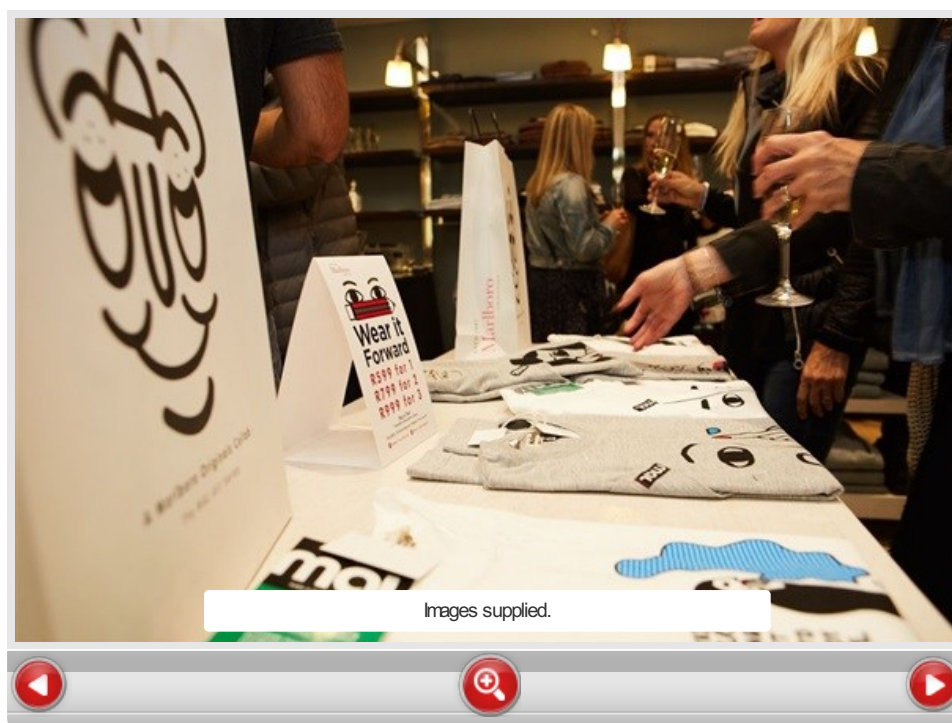
■ **Explain how the t-shirts tie in to 'wearing it forward' for the creativism trend.**

Strydom: Creativism is the mission to harness Africa's most powerful weapon, **ideas**, because ideas can change things. Creativity works. We want to use our platforms to collaborate on changing the things out there that get in the way of progress – things getting in the way of better futures, messing up the planet and messing up the way we relate to each other. Creativism is about harnessing the power of ideas to change things, it is not passive – relevant ideas are a catalyst that in turn make things happen. So why not use it as a weapon for good, to solve problems and reinvent?



The Mal Art Series t-shirt range gives the Marlboro Originals brands an edge and shows how even a small fashion retailer can put something back. It allows consumers to enjoy a cool tee and make a difference and, hey, gives us the

opportunity to create some awesome art on a t-shirt! Something that, when sold, sends funds directly to the libraries. And the libraries make a difference. So you are literally paying to forward simply by buying something cool to wear. A win-win. Circle complete!



The launch of the shirts at the Marlboro Originals store in the V&A Waterfront was actually, er, *Mal*. What a buzz, what an incredible take-up of the concept and the tees. Some people bought all seven in the range and the product is now literally flying off the shelves with such extraordinary *Mal*ness that they have had to produce more and will now also be launching at their Menlyn store. It's rewarding to see people adopting the idea of 'wearing it forward' so easily and mobilising more creativism in turn.

■ **Let us in on future plans to take the Creativism forward!**

Schalit and Strydom: We have a number of projects underway, including the second phase of the H2Zero project, which ran recently on SmileFM, collaborating with leading chefs to reimagine more original ways of tackling the water crisis in the Western Cape.



H2Zero launches waterless cooking celeb challenge

29 Aug 2017



To keep nurturing the Seed, there are plenty of collaborations on the go where all proceeds go towards the libraries. This includes another bespoke Mal range for Guild, the exciting new multi-faceted design store and gallery at the Silo District at the V&A Waterfront.



Southern Guild to get new location at V&A Waterfront Silo District

11 Jan 2017



Another particularly 'sweet' new project is also underway, a new flavour of giving This time, bespoke designer chocolate slabs with happening young entrepreneurs, My Sugar.

Then there's our most ambitious First Thursdays event yet, taking place at YoungBlood in Cape Town on 7 December, where we unleash our latest new ranges of funky new 'I Get Paid for This' collectibles and other Mal stuff, which also includes the Cape Town launch of the beautiful new Creative#Director coffee table book that's creating many waves, inspired and provoked by the insights of 30 remarkable South African creative leaders who have passed through the doors of Net#work BBDO over the last 23 years.

So many ways to get involved as a creativist. Schalit ends,

“ We make a living by what we get – We make a life by what we give. ”

Visit [Ideas4good.co.za](https://ideas4good.co.za) for the book or to donate to the libraries, or follow the Mal Foundation's [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) feeds for the latest updates. You can also order the tees online through marlborooriginals.co.za.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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