

Paying it forward

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Having lived through poverty as a child, chartered accountant (CA[SA]) Makoena Mabusela is passionate about helping others break out of the cycle



“When I was a child, I had a dream.” So says chartered accountant Makoena Mabusela, a senior aviation consultant at Investec. “I grew up in conditions nobody deserves to live in, but for me, poverty acted as a driver. I knew I would do whatever it took to change my situation.”

Makoena grew up in the rural areas of Matlala, Limpopo, and despite living in one of the poorest areas of South Africa, she feels privileged. “My father was a carpenter who worked informally, and my mother a school principal. They believed strongly in education, so I got lucky.”

As there were no good schools in their village, Makoena and her siblings had to walk 6km daily to school. “We would wake up at 4am, so we had time to clean and cook before leaving, and often we walked in the pouring rain, usually with no shoes.”

Far from feeling sorry for herself, Makoena has morphed empathy into action, and is passionate about using her now-privileged position to help others.

“There are three things I feel very strongly about, given my past: Education, poverty and gender equality. I want to make a difference.” As such, Makoena works tirelessly towards addressing the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, in particular those of reaching No Poverty, Quality Education and Gender Equality by 2030.

Thanks to her mother’s position as a principal, Makoena was blessed with the opportunity to attend boarding school from Grade 10 at Makgoka Secondary School in Limpopo. “When I got there it was very tough, I didn’t understand a thing,” she says. “I was driven though, and determined to succeed. At home we had no electricity or running water, and at boarding school I got to watch TV for the first time. This was a life I wanted to live.”

In her first year at boarding school, Makoena was on the brink of failing. By Grade 12 she placed firmly in the top five, allowing her to pursue a BComm (Accounting) at the University of the North (now University of Limpopo).

Soon after that, Makoena moved to the big city, where she bagged herself an internship at Metrorail in Johannesburg. There, her signature diligence and determination saw her advance to a managerial position by the age of 23.

That same year, the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) launched a TOPP (Training Outside the Public Practice) programme and Makoena left her job to join the three-year programme with Transnet. “TOPP allowed me to work my way through the whole of the company, while training to become a chartered accountant,” she explains. “Back then SAA was still a division of Transnet, and after I worked my last hours there, they asked me to stay on.”

At SAA, Makoena worked in financing aircraft, and it’s there that the aviation bug bit. “I had the privilege to travel the world, working with financial institutions and meeting the most fascinating people,” she explains. Armed with a unique skill-set, Makoena was able to move into banking, and is now in her fourth year at Investec, where her role includes marketing

aviation financing products and services to the broader aviation sector in Africa and the rest of the world.

For Makoena, it is upsetting to see how few women are involved in the industry. “This is something I am very vocal about,” she says. “People think of pilots when they talk about aviation, but there are countless jobs in this sector, from engineering to finance and so much more. It’s an industry filled with untapped opportunities and women are simply not exposed to it. I would love to create a local aviation expo for women.”

Makoena recognises that women are marginalised across all sectors, not just the aviation industry. For this reason, she mentors women both formally and informally in Investec, and also feels strongly about mentoring high school girls and speaking at schools in Limpopo. “Sometimes when I go back to Limpopo I see kids I grew up with living in terrible poverty. Some were really bright but had nobody that believed in them. That cycle needs to end.”

That’s why, despite a demanding job and raising a large family, Makoena insists on giving of her time. “My time is scarce, but fighting for women is so rewarding, it’s always worth it.”

Giving of her time is only one element of Makoena’s charitable work. For over seven years she has donated to Children of the Dawn, a programme which allows her to support a child financially throughout their schooling. Remembering her own days of walking for hours to school in the rain, Makoena also donates school shoes and school bags whenever she returns home to Limpopo. “We never had school bags and our books would literally dissolve in the rain,” she recounts.

Makoena is thrilled that, through her job at Investec, she has been given an opportunity to formalise her charitable work. In 2018 she was invited to join the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Leadership Fellowship Programme, a prestigious initiative that brings together leaders across the continent.

“A requirement of the programme is to set up a community project, and I have decided to build a library in Limpopo,” she says, her eyes lighting up. “Young kids in the rural areas have no stimulation, and I really want to change that.” She is currently in the process of securing a piece of land for the library, which will aptly be named A-re-Baleng (Let’s read). “It may seem like a small thing, but a library will create a stimulating learning environment for 3-12 year-olds as well as employment for adults in the area,” she explains. What’s more, Makoena plans to expand A-re-Baleng into a foundation, through which she will formalise her donation of school bags and shoes to children in the area.

Makoena lives by Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s words, ‘Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.’ For her, giving, whether it is of your time, expertise or money, is everything. “I have lived the effects of poverty, and I know firsthand that no child deserves to live through that.”

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