

Oliver's Neli Zuma is a shining example of pure grit and determination despite challenges

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Neli Zuma, content and community manager at Oliver's U-Studio in-house agency for Unilever is an eclectic mix of style, tenacity, and faith despite suffering an horrific car accident in 2016 and is a shining example of how perseverance and a passion for what you do can help one rise above extreme adversity and challenges.



Neli Zuma, content and community manager at Oliver's U-Studio in-house agency for Unilever

Hailing from humble roots in Impendle, KwaZulu-Natal, this vibrant twenty-something social media influencer whizz, blogger, public speaker and model, is a true survivor who hopes to inspire other survivors into entering the advertising world and follow their dreams.

In 2013 Nelisiwe graduated from the Durban University of Technology with a diploma in Public Relations Management. She was drawn to the world of social media and digital marketing and blogging. Her career highlights include guest influencer for KZN Bloggers Meet-Up, influencer of the month for The Original Champion Toffee, guest presenter at Future Females Durban, a cover model for the Durban based magazine (*Get It Durban*) and subject of a feature by London based Barcroft TV.

Her moving documentary with over 3-million views on YouTube was based on a life and body changing car accident in 2016, which left her physically and emotionally scarred. Being the resilient woman that she is, she embraced her scars, and through social media started a journey of recovery and changing the narrative around what beauty is.

Her story and triumph of overcoming not just her accident but multiple surgeries after her accident is nothing short of

miraculous and joining Oliver has helped her with this journey.

“There are multiple reasons why I chose to join Oliver in 2021; firstly, Theo Spencer, the managing partner for U-Studio Africa was one of the people that reached out to me and said I would be the correct fit for the brands that I am currently working on based on my experience, having previously worked as a community manager and with influencers.”

Although she had been informed in previous years that she would not be able to work due to her extensive injuries unless she was to get hired by a sympathetic employer but despite this she says that Theo knew still saw potential in her even when she didn't see it in herself.

“During my journey at Oliver, colleagues digital strategist Lloyd Wybrow and CCM Lead Nomxolisi Payi have also played a huge role in my insights and work,” she adds.

Zuma continues: “I had also wanted to prove to myself that I was worthy and capable of doing something greater regardless of what I was told about myself. Joining a company like Oliver and working on world class brands like Omo, Vaseline, Dove and Magnum sounded like a dream come true. It was a huge step into challenging myself and see how far my brain can go.”

Owning her scars after her tragedy has been a big part of her narrative. She points out that in all honesty It's been the people she has surrounded herself with for the past six years; her family, friends, church community, and mostly being honest with herself has helped her look at things in a completely different light.

“It takes a lot of work to get out of the dark, painful and emotionally draining self-pity but more than anything, it killed me seeing how I had given up on myself after everything I had overcome in the past and because of this realization, I decided to seek spiritual and emotional intervention.”

“I needed to be honest with myself and face the reality of what had happened to me, and how I was affected emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually and socially,” she admits.

As hard as it was to think of herself anything but normal when she was in pain and in deep loss, the journey towards finding healing taught her to be grateful that she had survived, and that she can walk and see was a big miracle.

She goes on to say that It took her a while to finally be ok with the changes in her and says that slowly she was at peace with knowing that things were never going to be the same for her.



“It was in this stage of my life that I promised myself to listen to my body, to be gentle and kind to self and most importantly to be more kinder on myself during the journey of finding the new me, the old me and the in between,” she explains.

She stresses that working on brands within the Unilever stable like Dove resonate with her own narrative on changing the stories around beauty by encouraging brands to use real people.

“Probably everyone at the office knows that I am an advocate for nano influencers. I strongly believe they are more authentic, genuine and relatable to our audiences,” she says.

“Working closely with people that work on disruptive brands like Dove, the one brand that is bold enough to keep changing the narrative around beauty and body positivity; not only did it fuel my heart with so much passion, joy and hope but it felt like I had joined a community of like-minded people, a team which speaks the same beauty language as me. I felt understood, heard, matter, belonging and definitely not alone just by seeing their content creation. Something about the way I was feeling was evolutionary.”

With every brand that she has been a part of, she believes that she should ‘walk, talk and live the brand’.

“I do this as my way as a content and community manager to find a deeper personal connection with each brand and its audience and while doing this, I’ve noticed there’s a huge gap to be filled but unfortunately, none of the BIG Ideas can come to life unless the right people are open to trying new things and tackling online topics that create disruption just as Dove does.”

As to what has been her experience in working with brands that she can use her story to inspire, she says that her experience has been a very interesting and challenging one because not all brands are open to trying new ways of doing things. “An example of this would be how I see a huge potential with my brands bringing South African women together and discussing issues of body transformation, confidence and positivity.”

She continues: “I believe this would be a success mainly because our audience are drawn to stories of introspection and skin journey. Including real-life stories of people with scars, dark marks, stretchmarks etc would help bring our audiences

closer to the brand.”

She says that one of the brands she is very much passionate about is Vaseline and that the company receives positive feedback about this brand from their Twitter community daily. “And as a content and community manager for this brand, I get to hear everything said about the brand.”

“All of our Twitter content is strictly organic, we simply jump into conversations and start interacting with our people to make them know that they matter and that we see them and because of this, our follower base has massively increased organically.”

For her, this proves that real-life stories have more in-depth meaning and connection, and that their audience resonates with such conversations.

“All the insights I have gathered have helped during the content creation and aligning our online creative with what resonates with our audience.”

Theo Spencer, managing partner at Oliver’s U-Studio says: “Neli has really grown personally and professionally since starting at U-Studio. Her can do attitude and willing to succeed is evident in her work ethic and her relationships with her team and brands. We are super proud of Neli and we look forward to nurturing and growing her at U-Studio Durban.”

She once mentioned in an interview that her dream is to find an organisation that will help assist the less privileged to get the best care and help in terms of affordable physiotherapists and psychologists in situations where it is needed and she says this is most definitely part of her future plans.

“Not everyone can afford medical aid or have access to basic healthcare. I come from a rural area whereby the community must still travel km’s just to get to a clinic. I was very lucky to have someone sponsor some of my physiotherapy sessions,” she explains.

She says that the accident allowed her to experience first-hand what an individual can go through financially, emotionally and physically and that the lack of healthcare access can delay your recovery process or it can worsen your injuries.

“Attending regular sessions with a physiotherapist and seeing a psychologist can make a HUGE difference in someone’s life. Honestly speaking only God knows what I would have done to myself had it not been for these sessions.”

She does still find time to blog, do public speaking and model although not as she would like to. She recently did an interview with an American Television Series called *Botched* and she is currently on a waiting list for people who might be sponsored to go for surgery on her abdomen and is holding thumbs for a positive outcome.

Through her blogging and motivational speaking she plans to continue igniting hope in the hearts of those who have given up on life because of extreme body transformation.

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