

Women entrepreneurs who have made their mark



Nicolette Tladi of the South African Women Entrepreneurs Network's (SAWEN) profiles nine South African women business owners whom they consider leading entrepreneurial lights – women who have overcome, or are overcoming, great odds and making successes of their ventures. They are, in no particular order or ranking, Cynthia Kuypers, Saantjie Steyn, Thandiwe Mfola, Gugu Majola, Doll Mahatanya, Mary Tyala, Dudu Thabede, Thope Lekau and Isabelle Rourke.

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Cynthia Kuypers: Designer Upholsterer



Hands-on: Cynthia Kuypers

Cynthia Kuypers is one of the few women in the competitive upholstery business, and is a hands-on business owner who not only manages her own business, but often works at putting the finishing touches on the workshop furniture. Her talents are diverse; she runs the upholstery shop, and designs décor items for contract caterers, wedding planners and event organisers and supplies furniture to shops in Kimberly (and surrounds) as well as to the general public. Her business currently employs 16 people, all trained upholsterers, machinists and designers.

Cynthia has attended financial management courses, and her subsequent improvement of the business' production and marketing processes eventually enabled her to introduce HR systems. Her interventions have helped to increase monthly turnover. With the boom in eventing, she's being kept busy designing and making tablecloth sets, drapes and cushions, etc.

On her plans for the future, Kuypers says, "With the demand for exclusive, affordable and quality furniture I've decided to expand into interior décor and offer people a one-stop décor and furniture solutions shop."

Saantjie Steyn: Botshabelo Community Creations



Proud achievers: Saantjie Steyn and colleague - Botshabelo Community Creations

Botshabelo Community Creations started when unemployed Botshabelo women mobilised themselves and started a training cooperative to gain self-help skills to reduce poverty and create jobs. At present the centre has eight employees, and the annual trainee intake (72) complements the production side of the business, which is registered as a close corporation.

Botshabelo offers SETA accredited training in the areas of beadmaking, fabric painting, dressmaking, cutting, designing, screen-painting, pelmet making and curtainmaking among others, using sophisticated industrial machines that were bought with funding from the National Development Agency (NDA). The organisation has produced more than 2 000 qualified and skilled machinists, who work at the centre, for themselves or for

Botshabelo factories; and, it attracts contract work from a variety of clients, including government. So successful has this venture been that now, years later, some of those graduates successfully run their own businesses while others are in training and developing their skills. In 2002, Botshabelo won the Free State Small Business Award.

According to Saantjie Steyn, Botshabelo is currently taking steps to build their domestic market while also being involved in exporting their products abroad and into the rest of Africa. The organisation's success has helped it secure funding for study tours of Denmark and Belgium in order to help the centre develop its overseas markets and the centre's trainers are sought after as far a field as Zimbabwe.

Steyn explains, "We recently received and delivered an order of 2 000 calico bags to the Netherlands and are exploring breaking into the Swedish, Belgian and Danish markets."

A kudo for the centre is that most of the work produced here has graced the national catwalks during SA Fashion Week. Steyn adds, "We also participate in the provincial fashion shows which encourages and motivates our students."

Thandiwe Mfolo: Tiroentle



Tiroentle owner and SAWEN Northern Cape Chapter Chairwoman

Thandiwe Mfolo is energetic, determined and witty, among other dynamic qualities. These qualities have seen her chosen as the first disabled businesswoman to chair SAWEN's provincial chapter as well as serve on its national council. Now she wants to ensure that other businesswomen are motivated and claim their fair share of the economic pie.

In addition to being a part-time switchboard operator at Spoornet, Mfolo runs a successful business consultancy and disabled people's placement agency, Tiroentle, which has successfully trained, selected and placed a number of disabled people in the workplace. Tiroentle also conducts workplace assessments, making recommendations on how workplaces can be made accessible to people living with disabilities.

Says Mfolo, "We run awareness classes for both the private and public sector, which aim to sensitise them to the needs of the disabled. I also serve on interview panels to assess disabled candidates applying for posts to ensure that they are given a fair chance."

She and her partner now also own a mattress-manufacturing factory that employs more than 20 people from in and around Galeshewe. Needless to say, most of them are disabled people.

Gugu Majola: Zamani Builders



Taking the family business to the next level: Gugu Majola of Zamani Builders

Working closely with her father Vezi Majola, 26-year old Gugu Majola has helped to grow their family-owned construction company into a multi-million rand operation. Majola is the operations manager for Zamani Builders, which is home to a workforce of over 20 full-time people, and often uses additional workers when more contracts are secured.

In operation for 19 years, the company's focus is on obtaining large building contracts for factories and office blocks. "Our core business is building and civil construction, although we sometimes quote on renovations or residential construction," says the energetic Majola.

As a 2005 graduate of the Women Entrepreneur Programme (WEP), a one-month course accredited through the University of Pretoria, Majola believes in the value of training and says that the continuous upgrading of both her and her employees' skills has been fundamental to the Zamani success.

Since her participation in WEP, Majola has realised an increase in Zamani's turnover to the tune of some 25 percent. "Being part of this programme was a blessing. Today I can confidently say I understand how turnovers and cash-flow systems work. I have also implemented new financial systems."

Ever aware of her market, a confident Majola says, "I am vigilant about competition around us, and areas that need improvement receive special attention. Our biggest challenge is the new emerging consortiums. While they are often awarded contracts, their expertise and knowledge is very limited, whereas we have the experience."

Zamani was recently awarded a R1.6-million contract.

Doll Mahatanya: Entrepreneur

Doll Mahatanya, who has run her own company for the past seven years, has been named the Free State ambassador by the premier for her sterling work as an events and interior design specialist. Her eventing and interior design clients include several government departments, corporates and individuals.

Her list of achievements is impressive. In 2002, she coordinated the Soccer World Cup stand in Korea; in 2003, the Cricket World Cup stand and the National Transnet Cultural Festival; in 2004, the National Tourism Conference; the Water Summit for the Mangaung Local Municipality as well as the catering; décor; entertainment; PR; venue and accommodation arrangements; invitations; and sourcing the speakers for the 10-year celebrations in Dakar in 2004.



By design: Doll Mahatanya

Mahatanya studied interior design, holds a PMA diploma from the Technikon Northern Gauteng, and is a member and head of marketing for the Free State Chamber of Commerce. She has received a number of business and exhibition awards.

According to Mahatanya, access to finance is a primary challenge facing women in business today, and she cites the slow pace for loan and grant approval by parastatals and government as problematic.

"For three years I struggled to make ends meet until I got a break in the fourth year. Since then I've been fortunate as financiers know me by reputation and know that I am prepared to risk some of my own monies in financing new ventures."

With IDC financing, Mahatanya also acquired a 50 percent ownership stake (with pool-maker and stone crafter, Elsa Erasmus) in a multi-faceted R5-million arts and crafters village in Bloemfontein. At 33, she is also the owner of an Italian style 34-bedroom-boutique hotel, Villa Favourita, which she sees as the ideal home for hosting some of the many functions that she coordinates.

Mary Tyala: Didimalang Luxury Guesthouse



When Mary Tyala's husband died, she was unemployed and looking for an opportunity to do something she enjoyed. Having decided to let go of the tavern (shebeen) and bottle store owned and run by her late husband, she began weighing up her options. Tyala realised that an opportunity existed to turn her large home into a guest house – something she was particularly excited to do having missed the bustle of her late husband's shebeen.

Along with a group of unemployed women, Tyala sold doughnuts to raise funds – funds that paid for roofing for her house. She applied for and received a dti SME Development Programme incentive for tourism, using

the monies to fund paving and a vehicle for airport transfers. She also received development financing from the Northern Province department of economic affairs and tourism, which went towards renovations and the building of a new wing. "I would also like to improve the signage on the main route from town and the airport," says Tyala.

The Eskom Foundation sponsored the training of Tyala's five employees in the areas of customer relations, room attendance and interpersonal skills.

Much of Tyala's business is based on referrals. "Word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool. I get tourists from all corners of the globe," she explains. She also uses marketing brochures at strategic venues around the province including airports, government departments and local media.

Tyala's establishment, the Didimalang Luxury Guesthouse, has a unique Euro-African style and is situated right in the middle of the Galeshewe township. It can accommodate 16 staying guests in its eight bedrooms, and has a conference facility and landscaped garden. Traditional African cuisine is a specialty.

Tyala wants someone to open a similar venture that she can refer guests to when she is fully booked, a regular occurrence during the tourist season. She also plans to open a shelter for Aids orphans, among others.

Dudu Thabede: Entrepreneur



Dudu Thabede: global trader and communication expert

Dudu Thabede runs three companies: one in branding, one in oil and energy, and one in international brand representation. She is an energetic, highly motivated entrepreneur driven by the belief that in order to contribute meaningfully to the SA economy more entrepreneurs need to move beyond subsistence self-employment, to the level of business owners and, ultimately, investors.

Thabede co-founded BrandSmart, a sought-after specialist branding consultancy and also runs an import-export company, Soul Fire Creations, which deals in African art and artifacts. She says, "I'm still in the process of establishing international markets for my products. We've had enquiries from France and are looking for agents for our products in the rest of Europe and the US."

"Some international enquiries have prompted us to review our product range. Product differentiation, the maintenance of high product quality standards, meeting delivery deadlines, and finding funding for market research and development are constant challenges. We are keen on multi-purpose items. We're looking for financing to go to Switzerland to inspect manufacturing facilities and to do due diligence."

Thabede is also a founding member and CEO of investment company Tsapi Investment Club, which in 2005 acquired a 51 percent interest in a petrol station. With her partners in this venture, Pino Mavengere and Thuso Motloung, she intends expanding their operations in petroleum, minerals and technology.

Thabede was chosen as one of 30 women-run SA businesses to attend the 2003 Global Summit for Women in Morocco. There she met a Swiss businesswoman with whom she is now negotiating part ownership of the European operation and rights for the brand in Africa.

Thope Lekau, Kopanong



Seizing opportunity: Owner of Kopanong B&B in Cape Town, Khayelitsha: Thope Lekau

Thope Lekau seized opportunity when it presented itself after spotting the business opportunities in township tourism. After getting to know tour guides and operators she soon challenged them to let their visitors off the tour buses, giving them a chance to interact with residents; and offered her home as a stop-over for refreshments. She soon found that visitors were truly interested in her local neighbourhood and culture and some would ask if they could extend their visits. It didn't take long for her to make the decision to open her home as a bed and breakfast (B&B) for tourists.

Situated in Khayelitsha, Kopanong – which means 'where the world meets' – is synonymous with hospitality and African food. Visitors from across the world come to Kopanong to enjoy township life and its traditional dishes: umqombothi and amarhewu. Lekau's rich experiences as a community development worker, combined with her qualifications as a tour guide, ensures guests a truly interesting stay.

Lekau's efforts paid off: At the end of 1999, she won the Tygerberg Municipality award for Outstanding Service in the Hospitality Industry; in 2000, she was finalist in the MTN Emerging Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year in the Cape Tourism Award category and in 2003 Kopanong won gold in Cape Tourism Showcase Awards' Woman in Tourism category. International media exposure on CNN and the Discovery Channel has led to an increase of visitors from Ireland and The Netherlands especially, and Lekau has even catered for Rhodes Scholars and Japan's Peace Boat.

In 1998, she held a year-long fellowship at the University of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) where she studied small-scale entrepreneurship. "I realised that lack of finance, support and nurturing are key problems (to women in business). You can have good ideas, knowledge and finance but you won't survive unless you network and get involved in issues affecting other women in business. I continually work on improving myself and assisting others who want to succeed," she says.

Lekau has served on the Tourism Grading Council since 2000, where she helps design new tourism grading criteria. She has completed an accommodation assessor course with the Tourism and Hospitality SETA and trains B&B owners as far a field as Knysna and George in managing their businesses.

She also operates a tour-guide business as well as a catering business

that employs 10 people. She has further expansion plans for which she is seeking access finance. "Although I'm well known, I still face finance challenges. Our national policies are good, but walking into a financial institution and asking for money is a nightmare," she says.

Isabelle Rourke: Anamazing Workshop



Isabelle Rourke: Anamazing Workshop owner and Technology for Women in Business Award winner for 2004.

In 2004, Isabelle Rourke, founder of animation company Anamazing Workshop, won the 2004 Technology for Women in Business award. Daphney Mashamaite, speaking for Technology for Women in Business, said, "Rourke's understanding of the market opportunities in her environment, the use of appropriate technology to grow her business and long-term vision for the future made her a worthy winner and will set the standard for those to come. Other aspects that impressed the judging panel were her innovative enterprising abilities, her investment in ensuring skills transfer, and the manner in which she has used the power of ICT as a valuable business tool."

Rourke has travelled to Denmark and has entered into a start-up facility with a Danish company in order to bring their animation methodology to SA. Through this partnership, Rourke has sent a black trainer to be trained in Denmark.

According to Rourke, Anamazing underwent major strategic changes in 2004, which resulted in the dropping of non-core assets in order to focus on long-form animation.

She says, "Although this has been a very expensive exercise, many pieces of a puzzle that we started putting together over the years are starting to form a picture. We have secured a deal with the SABC to produce a TV series based on a 40-year old SA brand. We have successfully raised the majority of funding for our animation production training scheme, which will be launched in the second half of this year, and we have restructured our business plan. We are currently in the process of identifying potential investors."

Rourke offers useful advice to budding entrepreneurs: "If you know you have what it takes to run your own business, release yourself of all debts and go after your dream. It is the most challenging experience of your entire life. Nothing will teach you more and at a faster rate than running a business. Nothing else will make use of every single skill and talent you have.

"There are days when one thinks that you have made a mistake and that everything is going to fall apart. As long as you are willing to stick it out through the tough times, you will be rewarded for your efforts. It's tough, but it's more rewarding than any job. Have faith and believe."

**Nicolette Tladi is currently the manager for Outreach and Client Relations in the Department of Trade and Industry's marketing division. She writes for the 2006 edition of Top Women in Business and Government in association with SAWEN: The South African Women Entrepreneurs Network.*