



THINKING FOR MYSELF, FIGHTING FOR OUR
COMMUNITY

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South Africa

I was born in a mud house to a domestic worker and a gardener. It was Pietermaritzburg, 1989. South African history tells us it was the peak of Black-on-Black violence, the dawn of democracy. I was too young to remember apartheid but old enough to experience it. The evil system deprived Black people of opportunities. We're still feeling its legacy today.

At six years old I was confronted with the concepts of gender and sexuality for the first time. We were playing games after school when one of my classmates asked if I was a girl or a boy. "I'm a boy," I responded. They didn't believe me. The other kids teased my "girly" behaviour and told me I wasn't a "normal boy." A "stabane," they called me, an anti-queer slur that stabbed through my heart.

From that day forward I knew I was different from other kids. The bullying hurt, but it helped me understand that gender is a social construct. People try to change you, to turn you into something or someone you're not, to force you to fit their idea of what's "right," even if it feels wrong. What could I do?

At 10 I moved from Pietermaritzburg to live with my aunt in Soweto. Space was tight, so we slept on the floor. Around that time South African entertainer Somizi Mhlongo came out as gay on national television and started hosting a talk show in drag. I remember hearing hushed rumours

that the kwaito singer Lebo Mathosa was bisexual. These stories were taboo in my community, giggled or whispered around me, but they revealed an important truth. People like me existed.

A few years later, just as I was settling into high school, I lost my mother. She was HIV-positive and died from pneumonia. Mired in grief and with no one to talk to, I started questioning things. Why her? Why this? Why now? Mom died just when I was coming of age. Her own mother died when she was 16, forcing her to drop out of school to work and raise her siblings. She spent her entire life providing. To me she was the epitome of gender-nonconforming — she was my mom and my dad. As her gender-nonconforming child, I wanted to make her proud.

When it came time to choose a subject for Grade 10, I chose history. I thought studying the past would help me escape my present, but then I read a quote that sparked a dream: “If you do not think about politics, politics will think for you.” This idea stuck with me. I couldn’t shake it. It pushed me to question politicians and their power, to hold parties accountable, and to play my part in protecting our young democracy.

From then on I knew I wanted to become a politician, but daily hardships squashed my dream. Right after high school, I became homeless. I lost all hope and confidence. I was just living to survive to the next day.

At 22 I tested HIV-positive. I imagined death, but then I came across the National LGBTI Health Campaign and enrolled in their HIV/AIDS training programme. I learned that I could still lead a long and healthy life. I decided to move back to KZN for a fresh start and to put things in perspective.

The first six months were hard. I couldn’t find a job, so I volunteered with the Gay & Lesbian Network in Pietermaritzburg and completed a certified HIV/AIDS counselling course. These skills helped me land a job with Community Media Trust, and soon I was presenting and co-hosting shows on a local radio station. Friends around me were addicted to ecstasy and alcohol, but I was focused on changing my life for the better.

My dream of joining politics slowly came back to me, but I didn’t see anyone like me, any members of our local LGBTQI+ community,

involved. Pietermaritzburg is small, and I often felt unsafe and unable to express myself, but I knew our voices needed to be heard. When I came across a fellowship programme that promised to train queer South African political activists, I remembered that quote, “If you do not think about politics, politics will think for you.” I jumped at the opportunity and was selected to join the network.

Since that training in 2019, I’ve never looked back. LGBTQI+ people need political representation, and we need to exercise our political voice. COVID lockdowns have only emphasised the intense discrimination, marginalisation, hate crimes, and political exclusion our queer communities face.

That’s why I launched the Isibani Civil Society Forum in 2020. The Forum seeks to engage political parties and the government to amplify political participation and inclusion of LGBTQI+ people and promote inclusive government policy on issues like gender-affirming health care. By coming together as one community, I believe we can amplify our voices and achieve political liberation.

The Isibani Civil Society Forum has shown me the importance of engaging political parties. As an active member of the African National Congress in my ward, I continue to face heteronormative and patriarchal biases. Rather than shy away, I now confront these biases head-on because I know I represent our queer community. One day I hope to represent all communities as an elected member of the KZN Legislature.

I’m still thinking about politics and thinking for myself, but thinking only gets you so far. I’m now working hard to raise queer voices and fighting for the political representation we deserve.

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