

Luyanda Zuma, 23, from Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal (now living in Waterfall, Johannesburg) is no stranger to beauty pageants, having been a Top 10 finalist in Miss South Africa 2022, coming in the top six at Miss Charm International and placing first runner up at Miss Amagugu in 2019.

The actress and model with a Bachelor in Live Performance from AFDA says she has returned to the competition as an older, evolved authentic woman.

"I consistently challenge myself to rise to higher standards. Championship is about more than winning titles; it's about carrying my country's pride onto every stage, showing the world the power and resilience of South African women."

Luyanda understands that wearing the crown means being of service. To this end she has committed to uplifting communities and creating lasting impact. Through her newly established media house LeNZ Media she wants to contribute to African storytelling and open doors for new Graduates.

"I am proudly Zulu, deeply rooted in tradition, and my role in the TV series Shaka iLembe has given me a profound connection to my ancestors' stories and the importance of preserving and celebrating South Africa's diverse heritage. I want to inspire others to embrace their culture."

For Luyanda, pageantry encourages growth with purpose and "allows us to evolve in ways that uplift ourselves and the communities we represent." She says will use the platform to inspire and uplift others

To make a meaningful difference in the world, a woman needs resilience to rise above challenges, integrity to lead with honesty, empathy to connect with people and vision to create a lasting impact. This helps her positively shape herself and her community.

The Miss South Africa pageant, she says, needs to be inclusive and representative to heal the division and exclusion of the past. "Inclusivity ensures that every South African regardless of culture, heritage, or circumstance can see themselves reflected on this platform. What makes our country remarkable is its diversity. We are the rainbow nation."

Luyanda credits her family for the woman she is today. Her mother, a school principal since 2008, passed on her entrepreneurial spirit to Luyanda and her two siblings early. "Whether it was selling sweets at the school gates or helping at flea markets, she made sure I understood the value of hard work. Her dedication as a teacher in a rural primary school also fuelled my drive for education and instilled in me the passion to bridge the gap for underprivileged children."

From her father, a former military soldier and policeman, she learned about discipline, service, and cultural pride. "He made sure I never lost touch with my Zulu heritage. Together, my parents instilled in me resilience, respect, and responsibility."

Community service is important to Luyanda who, through her child and youth development focused Nonhlelo Foundation, spends time in orphanages.

In 2022, she initiated the Clean Up Pietermaritzburg Campaign and helped underprivileged schools through donations and mentorship.

She is currently planning a sports and cultural tournament, and wants to ensure schools have safe sports facilities and platforms that build talent and teach discipline, teamwork, and resilience.

"Child and youth development is the most powerful tool to address many of the social ills in our country.

Luyanda loves the South African spirit of Ubuntu, 'I am because we are', which is a reminder that the success of one is tied to the well-being of all. "Ubuntu makes us a family. I love South Africa – our compassion and resilience build hope."

For this Top 10 finalist, success is not defined by titles or wealth but by impact and growth, remaining true to her values and using her opportunities to uplift others.

"True success is not just achieving for myself but creating pathways for others to achieve as well.'

She believes that unemployment is the biggest issue affecting young people today, robbing them of dignity, independence, and purpose. "For young women in particular, the lack of opportunities can lead to vulnerability, exploitation, and diminished self-worth," she said.

Her message to young women and girls is that they do not underestimate the power of their resilience and their voice saying: "I once doubted my own beauty and worth, but have learnt that true strength comes from embracing who you are and standing proudly in it. To every young woman: you are enough."

Luyanda believes that South Africa is blessed with many cultures, languages, and traditions and says she would use the Miss South Africa platform to celebrate that diversity while building unity. "As an actress and storyteller, I've seen the power of narrative first-hand. Being part of a historical production like Shaka iLembe showed me how stories can ignite pride and unity in our nation. With the Miss South Africa platform, I would use that same power of storytelling alongside initiatives in education, entrepreneurship, sport, and the arts to create spaces where young people from different backgrounds can see themselves reflected and respected. By championing our diversity through shared stories and shared purpose, I believe Miss South Africa can be a symbol of Ubuntu: a reminder that we are strongest when we stand together as one rainbow nation.

Because pageantry is evolving beyond beauty Luyanda wants to launch an impact initiative called *She Is Because He Is*, that highlights the interconnectedness between the girl child and the boy child, recognising that empowering one cannot happen without educating the other. "By teaching boys from a young age to respect women, to challenge toxic masculinity, and to see themselves as protectors rather than threats, we create a society where girls feel safe, valued, and respected."

Luyanda wants to use her voice to inspire South Africans to believe in their collective strength.

"Progress is born from participation; real transformation begins when ordinary people choose to act together.

"Through my own work in youth development, I've seen that when a classroom receives

resources, or when a community comes together to clean its streets, there is not only change in the environment there is change in the spirit of the people. Small actions create momentum, and momentum creates movements.

"I would use the Miss South Africa platform to highlight these everyday acts of courage and compassion, showing that our collective strength is not just in surviving our challenges, but in actively building the future we want. Because when we recognise that each of us holds a piece of the solution, South Africa becomes unstoppable."

Fact File: Luyanda

1. An actress with a degree in Life Performance has appeared in South Africa's most celebrated TV series, Shaka iLembe.
2. Founded LeNZ Media, a media house dedicated to African storytelling and creating opportunities for young graduates in the creative industry.
3. Runs the Nonhlelo Foundation, which focuses on child and youth development.
4. Actively dedicates her time to orphanages, schools, and community campaigns.
5. Wanted to bleach her skin as a child because she could not see the true beauty of her natural skin. That experience taught her the importance of self-acceptance
6. Values her ability to forgive and let go.
7. Would change nothing about herself. "Every part of who I am makes up the unique woman I have become."
8. Names Basetsana Khumalo, Miss South Africa 1994, as her role model. "She became one of South Africa's greatest media moguls. The crown was the start of her journey."
9. Would choose to lunch with the grandfather she never met "to learn from him while connecting with the roots of my family in a deeper way".

SHORT-FIRE QUESTIONS

1. Reading: The 5am Club a self-help book by Robin Sharma.
2. Listening to: Maskandi.
3. Favourite TV shows: Shaka iLembe, Inimba, Levels.
4. Favourite meal: Nando's quarter leg.
5. Guilty pleasure: Drinking directly from a juice bottle in the fridge.
6. Idea of perfect happiness: A life where I'm at peace with myself, surrounded by love, and living with purpose.
7. Greatest fear: Losing my parents; the idea of death frightens me.
8. Greatest extravagance: fashion and shopping.
9. Happiest time: as a carefree little girl with no adult responsibilities.
10. Talent most wanted: The ability to sing.
11. Most treasured possession? My grandmothers doek.
11. Most valued quality in friends: Loyalty and honesty.
12. **Motto: "You are never too young to lead".**

Your social media tags:

Facebook: melanin_lrl0

Instagram:melanin_lelo

Twitter:melanin_lelo

TikTok:melanin_lelo