

Zanele Phakathi, 27, from Soweto, Gauteng (she lives in Pretoria), has an Advanced diploma degree in Business Information Technology from the University of Johannesburg, and works with the Enterprise Architecture team at the Public Investment Corporation. She is also the founder of Diamonds Model Academy – where she mentors and trains young models – and Za Power House Foundation, where she runs community programmes focused on education and youth empowerment.

She was a Miss South Africa finalist in 2019. She calls that a defining moment in her journey, saying the experience taught her resilience, confidence, and the importance of using one's platform to serve others.

"I entered again this year because this platform has the power to multiply impact. As Zanele, I've run food drives, pad drives, and mentorship initiatives... If I can achieve this as myself, imagine what I could do as Miss South Africa? Beyond gowns and crowns, pageantry is about purpose and influence; using your voice to stand for something; leaving a legacy of impact."

To implement meaningful change, women, she says, need courage (to step into spaces where she may be doubted), compassion (to understand and uplift others) and conviction (to remain rooted in her purpose).

South Africa is a diverse nation, and Miss South Africa must embody that diversity. Inclusion ensures that every girl, no matter her background, language, or appearance can look at the crown and believe, "This could be me."

Zanele comes from a close-knit family of strong women. Her mother is a school principal whose discipline and dedication to education shaped her love for learning and service. She has four sisters whose children are like her own. "Growing up in such a nurturing and resilient family has taught me the values of responsibility, care, and perseverance."

Through her foundation, she runs career drives, food drives, and mentorship initiatives. She also teaches coding in Soweto and creates safe spaces for young girls to explore opportunities beyond what they know.

"I have helped girls attend matric dances with dignity, provided sanitary pads to schoolgirls, organised food parcels for struggling families, and supported young people in accessing tertiary education. I am proud that these efforts have restored hope and dignity where it was needed most."

Now she wants to expand her *Empower Ed campaign* nationally, ensuring that every child, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, has access to career guidance and digital skills.

Zanele loves the resilience of South Africans, who, despite challenges, rise, create, and believe in tomorrow.

She believes that success should not be measured by titles or possessions, but by the number of lives touched and the legacy left behind.

An area that remains a major challenge for young people, she says, is unemployment and the lack of access to opportunities.

To young women and girls, her message is clear: "Do not let your circumstances define your future."

Zanele says: "To unite South Africans with different backgrounds, I will use storytelling and education to highlight the beauty in our diversity, creating spaces where young people can learn from each other's cultures and traditions."

She would launch her advocacy campaign Empower Ed nationwide, ensuring every child has access to career guidance, mentorship, and digital skills to help bridge the gap between talent and opportunity.

FACT FILE: ZANELE

1. She is an IT graduate working in Enterprise Architecture.
2. She was a Miss South Africa finalist in 2019.
3. She founded Diamonds Model Academy, training aspiring models.
4. She doesn't eat chocolate.
5. Her happiest moments are seeing her mother smile.
6. Her biggest disappointment was facing repeated rejection early in her career, overcoming it by remaining resilient, "and trusting God's timing".
7. She likes that she remains compassionate and hopeful, even in difficult circumstances.
8. If she could change one thing about herself, she'd be less self-critical and extend the same kindness to herself that she gives to others.
9. Her female role models are former Miss SA, Basetsana Kumalo for her resilience and ability to reinvent herself, and Michelle Obama for her advocacy for education.
10. She would lunch with Nelson Mandela to learn how he kept hope alive even during the darkest times.
11. In her spare time, she reads and spends time with her nieces and nephews.

SHORT-FIRE QUESTIONS

1. Reading: Will by Will Smith.
2. Listening to: Gospel and Amapiano.
3. Favourite TV shows: Shark Tank and reality cooking shows.
4. Favourite meal: Chicken schnitzel with vegetables.
5. Guilty pleasure: Binge-watching series late into the night.
6. Idea of perfect happiness: Seeing my mother happy and at peace.
7. Greatest fear: Not living up to my full potential.
8. Greatest extravagance: Investing in books and skincare.
9. Happiest: At my graduation, seeing my mother's pride.
10. Talent most wanted: To sing beautifully.
11. Most treasured possession: A necklace my mother gave me.
12. Most valued quality in friends: Loyalty, honesty, and support.

Motto: God's timing is perfect

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