

A conversation with...

Dr. Felicia Mabuzza-Suttle

Felicia Mabuzza-Suttle is famous for her award-winning show "Felicia" and her current "Conversations with Felicia" show which airs on The Africa Channel in the USA. She is thus no stranger to television having spent over 10 years on South African airwaves as host of her personal talk show which earned her the name "South Africa's Oprah," a dub she does not appreciate. She was honoured as one of the Leading Business Women Entrepreneurs of the World 2001 by the Star Group in America.

Less well known by the public at large is her role in the launch of Pamodzi Investments, an investment consortium that began with seed capital of R3-million, but has grown into a fund worth more than R100-million. She has her own ranges of eyewear, shoes and clothing, and has fulfilled her life-long dream of starting a restaurant, Back O Moon, at Gold Reef City, south of Johannesburg.

Dr. Felicia was born in Sophiatown and grew up in Soweto, where she started a cultural centre for the youth. She "Dared to dream" (the title of her autobiography) and broke free of the apartheid notion that blacks could not achieve anything.

I caught up with Dr. Felicia a few days before the launch of Pamodzi's billion rand empowerment fund which she contends is the biggest empowerment fund ever in the country. Her motto which I love tremendously is "It's not where you come from that matters, but where you are going."

On owning an apartment on Trump Towers she says;

I have been staying there for 3 years now. (Shows a picture of a view from her balcony on Trump Towers.) My daughter was supposed to come and stay with me but decided to go and stay in Tribeca. I basically shuttle between Atlanta and New York. Atlanta always makes me feel like I am in South Africa. The sun, the people and all.

About Felicia, the business woman she says;

Pamodzi was my second short at business; I started small with my restaurant Back O the Moon. I came from a family that is very entrepreneurial. My grandmother was the first black man to own a security company in Sophiatown. He was also the first black man to own two restaurants in downtown Johannesburg. So I came from a background that was very entrepreneurial. My father was one of the first black men to own a Speedy driving school franchise for instance. So Pamodzi for me was really the big league. I saw 2 young men, Ndaba Ntsele & Dumi Sethole; who really educated me to think about more zeros (laughter). We are currently on the eve of launching one of the biggest empowerment funds in the country. R 1,8 billion! As you may know Pamodzi owns 51% of Foodcorp. And for me to see close to 3000 employees retire comfortably as a result of Pamodzi's stake in the business makes me proud.

On whether Southern Africa is progressing socially and politically she says;

The challenges are huge. I take my hat off to Thabo Mbeki for leading us thus far. We can not undo the injustices of so many years over just 13 yrs. We are a young democracy. Yes some things are going out of control but we understand why and we are working at making them better. We have a tendency as Africans not to give ourselves a pat on the back for our achievements and those that are rising are not raising enough. We need to raise more. That should be inborn in us. I will be the first to admit that I have been polluted by popular American culture. Let me give you an example. It is

courteous to greet someone when you meet them in our African culture, right? Now I came across a man a couple of days ago upstairs and he looked familiar but I was afraid to greet him because I thought he would think I liked him (laughter). So I just went past him. Afterwards I felt very bad and so I went to the reception and asked who he was and they told me. So I wrote a note and apologized to the man saying "I apologise for walking past you without greeting you when I think you were trying to acknowledge me." He called me back, and said he takes his hat off to me for living up to what I preach on my talk show. He said when my note came he was sitting in his room with uSis' Winnie (Madikizela-Mandela) and our minister Thoko Didiza! Can you imagine!? I felt so horrible. I thought to myself "come on Felicia you are African first, don't let this American culture take away who you are."

In fact my second book, my first book was *Dare to dream* as you know; my second book is entitled *Living my dream*. And it seeks to say any girl from the township or from wherever can live on Trump Towers if they believe and my third book will have to be about a clash of cultures really, because I find myself literally torn between two cultures.

On Felicia the celebrity who became the "Face of Lux beauty soap in the 70s" she says;

I don't know about the celebrity part because I don't consider myself a celebrity. I see myself as a servant. I was with George Bizos just now at a breakfast and he was telling us how we all need to be servants at heart. He told the story of Popo Molefe as a servant in the struggle. The lessons from the Bible that were taught in schools were really about the struggle. I used to teach young kids ballroom dancing and the music, we used to dance to, was about the struggle. For instance James Brown's lyrics "Say it loud, I'm Black and I am proud!" For rumba we used Nina Simone's Young, gifted and black. At that time I was 17 and should have been dating and stuff but here I was helping these kids. Again it was Eric Mafuna who took me and made me the "Face of Lux beauty soap." I never thought of it as being a celebrity more than a role model in a role that I was thrown into to make a



difference.

Her favourite holiday spot?

Ironically, South Africa is my favourite holiday destination. We have travelled everywhere. Last Christmas, we decided that instead of going to South Africa as usual we would go somewhere and so we went to Argentina and Brazil. For me that was the biggest waste of time and money, not offence intended. My husband even said I wish we had stayed in Cape Town or went back as we usually do. There is something so magical and beautiful about South Africa.

On living apart from her husband and daughters she says;

I think we've proved that distance makes a heart grow fonder and does not make it wonder. I am married to a much actualised man. He believes in my mission for my country, He believes in my journey. He loves my country, he believes in my country. He always says "the first day I met you, I knew that your country is your first love and I will be your second," and in reply I would say he maybe my third as my children are my second love (laughter). I know people would say, "Ag, please sis Felicia," but I really mean it. I truly love my country. I believe God has put me on earth to serve my country and I am now trying to broaden that commitment to include the rest of the continent, but South Africa is my first love. (More coffee please waiter!) In many ways my mission is to serve my

country.

On favourite books she would recommend she says;

There are just so many. Many people think I come from a privileged background; maybe it is so because my grandfather refused to be moved into a government house and instead vowed to build one that would tower over them. So he built the first double storey house in Soweto, in fact the Maponya (Soweto retail mogul) one came second. I don't know, but I think the book I am enjoying now is a book on destiny, because everything happens for a reason. Come to think of it; my husband sees me for the first time all those years ago at a function and forgets to ask for my numbers and when I leave he runs after me and find me, and here we are today. This book tells you that everything happens for a reason. When I left E-TV, they thought I was leaving them for another channel but I went back to the USA and guess what? If I had not gotten back, fate would have it that I would have lost all the credits I had accumulated towards my PhD. So my coming back to the USA was in time. And attaining my doctorate was a victory against apartheid that taught me I would never become anybody. (Shows off musician Busi Mhlongo's grandson's picture on her phone.)

On the question of whether she

has now reached a point of self-actualisation in her life she says;

It's exciting when you hear your children say to you; "Mom we think you truly have achieved self actualization according to Marlowe's law." Which I believe is true. So now I can safely say I can do anything I want to do, and still continue to maintain a sane standard of living. There is somebody up there who is looking after me and I do believe that when I get to Heaven one day God will be waiting for me and will say come inside my girl.

The rest of my conversation with Felicia was both delightful and frivolous and gave my sometimes skeptical self reason to be positive about this Africa on the rise. ■

Text: Themba Nkala
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