

MAIN PICTURE: Mpho Suping has been a data capturer for the Department of Health for nine years and does everything her colleagues do, using – her feet.



NO ARMS, NO PROBLEM!

She has endured more hardship in her lifetime than she cares to remember, yet Mpho Suping's positive outlook has helped her conquer life's trials

BY **SIBUSISIWE NYANDA**
PICTURES: **MDUDUZI NDZINGI**

IT'S almost 3 pm on Hilda Street in Hatfield, Pretoria – where the headquarters of the Department of Health is based – and people are preparing to go home. A spicy floral scent greets us as we exit the lifts on the second floor where, inside an ordinary-looking office an extraordinary woman, Mpho Suping awaits us.

Her face is perfectly made-up, complete with nude glossy lips. She is wearing a navy polka-dot blouse with a neck bow and the sleeves of her red cardigan are neatly tucked in – where her arms should be.

"The people in this office know I love to look and smell good," she says using her toes to spray on a little more scent. Then, still using her foot, she picks up her phone and rests it on her

shoulder while she again uses her toes to dial.

The 37-year-old was born with no arms and had to teach herself to do everything using her feet. "I can't stand people who stand on street corners and beg, using their disability as an excuse," she says as she casually presses the lift button with her foot.

MPHO'S childhood memories aren't filled with Sunday lunches and pretty Christmas dresses, but with hardship and abandonment. Born at Leratong Hospital in Krugersdorp, she was abandoned at birth by her mother and later taken in by her paternal grandmother. She attended Tlamelang School for the Physically Disabled

RIGHT: Mpho hopes to become an entrepreneur one day and plans to have her own home.



in Gelukspan, just outside Mafikeng, and in 1998 was sent to Filadelfia Secondary School in Soshanguve.

Mpho led a fairly lonely life and even after her brother managed to track her down and visit her at school one day, nothing changed. "He didn't leave contact details for me to reach him or my parents. He never came to see me again either," she says.

A life-altering moment was meeting Belfa Moholoagae (43), a teacher at Filadelfia and now her foster parent and close friend. "Mpho was one of my learners," Belfa says. "She had a radiant personality and we immediately got along."



LEFT: Belfa Moholoagae (middle) and her family helped Mpho find a sense of belonging when they took her in. Mpho has since grown into a confident and independent young woman.

As their friendship grew, Mpho spent more and more time with Belfa, her husband and daughter. Mpho fitted right into the family and, says Belfa, "I felt unnatural to let her go, especially over the school holidays." In time the Moholoagae family made the decision to welcome Mpho into their family permanently and her life changed forever. Mpho matriculated in 2000 and enrolled at Marktown College to study Human Resource Management. Her studies were sponsored by TV host Felicia Mabuza-Suttle after she had appeared on her talk show. After graduating she started a partnership with the Department of Health, where she still works.

Four years ago Mpho's maternal aunts and uncles came to see her in Mabopane. "The first time they had seen me I was three years old and they were surprised to see that I had grown into a young professional," she says, her face lighting up. "They asked for forgiveness and apologised for not being there for me when I needed them most."

Sadly, both Mpho's parents died without ever seeing her success. She doesn't recall ever meeting her father and when she asked about her mother she was told that she became angry and upset

whenever Mpho's name was mentioned, and refused to talk about the daughter she abandoned.

BUT although the past is painful Mpho believes her future is bright. She hopes to one day open a learning centre for children – specialising in computer literacy – and become a homeowner.

"I decided after I turned 18 that having no arms would not stop me from living my life. I was shy and never left the house before, but I refused to carry on like that," she says.

This is all thanks to a former boyfriend, Belfa chimes in: "He'd walk around the neighbourhood with her, showing her that she had nothing to be ashamed of."

Mpho has been in a same-sex relationship for the past three years. She met her girlfriend Kagiso in a local tavern and Mpho still giggles when she recalls their meeting. "I thought she was a guy – a really handsome guy. I was really charmed by her and our first kiss was amazing," she blushes.

Mpho says she is really happy with Kagiso, but has been fearful of society's judgement. But for the young woman who was rejected by her own family and stared at by strangers, what matters is the acceptance of her nearest and dearest.

"I once asked Belfa what she would do if she found that I was in love with a woman. She said 'As long as you're happy, who am I to complain?' and I just knew everything would be alright." ■

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LEFT and BELOW: Mpho at the Moholoagae family's home. She's taught herself how to use her feet for everything, and her disability hasn't stopped her from living a full life.



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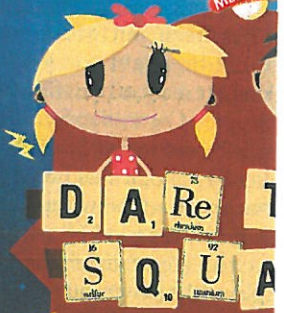


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