

## Q&amp;A

# 'We got South Africa talking'

During Women's Month, veteran journalist, Felicia Mabaza-Suttle is paying tribute to the resilient women of South Africa. The 71-year-old Mabaza-Suttle, who is now based in the US, tells **Kelly Richards** how she dealt with patriarchy in the media world, her passion for youth development and why she is a self-confessed germaphobe

**You were South Africa's first talk show host and contributed to the development of the country's youth. Take us back to the streets of Sophiatown and Soweto where you grew up and tell us about your childhood role models.**

When Nelson Mandela made that call to South Africans living abroad to come back home to help build a new democracy in 1991 during his US visit, I felt he was talking to me personally, because I was living in Atlanta. My first show was with South Africans who had come back home to serve. My upbringing had prepared me for this mission, growing up in Sophiatown and later in Soweto. I have vivid memories of the dusty and dangerous streets of Sophiatown, with gangsters fighting each other with stones. I was struck by one and have the mark to show.

I was young, but remember the role models I had: the teachers, priests, nuns and community leaders who shaped my life. I was a young member of icon Emily Motsieloa's singing Tiny Tots — we competed in singing competitions in our white dresses, red ribbons and black shoes. My best memory was when we were the opening act for Miriam Makeba and the Manhattan Brothers. I was obsessed with Miriam and wanted to sing like her when I grew up.

It was an honour to host her on *The Felicia Show* and to reminisce about my childhood dreams with her and to sing with her on my show.

**Tell us a bit more about your childhood in Soweto...**

The apartheid government's forced removals of blacks from Sophiatown moved us to Dube in Soweto. My proud grandfather, Ben Mabaza, decided to build the first double-storey house in Soweto to demonstrate to the apartheid government the type of housing black people deserved. I was influenced by great role models from Sophiatown to Soweto, like Dr and Mrs Xuma; Dr and Mrs Motlana; Mr and Mrs Maponya; Mrs Ellen Khuzwayo; our neighbour, Gibson Kente, and his wife, Evelyn, who was a top model; and more.

My background in Mrs Motsieloa's Tiny Tots taught me to do the same in Soweto where I grew up: to gather young people and start my dance school in the early 70s, called Tswelopele Dance Academy. Some of the youth were not that much younger than me. The goal of the dance school was to keep them off the streets and, in the words of



Steve Biko, to "conscientise" them and to instil black pride. We danced to songs with a message like *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* by Nina Simone and *Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud* by James Brown.

**You are living in the US, but you manage to stay in touch with South Africa: its youth, politics and the different events here. How important is that connection to you?**

I always say, "My body is in America, but my heart is in South Africa." There is no place like home — Mzansi is in my DNA — the warmth of our people, the beauty of our country and the sound of our musical harmony. I get excited just hearing a South African song on the radio in the US. I love young people. They supported me during the days of *The Felicia Show*. They could see what I was trying to do as some of the older folks knocked me — black and white.

But I kept my focus on my focus — I was not going to be distracted. I was on a mission. I answered an important call: to come and use my skills to bring black and white South Africans together, through dialogue, after 40 years of apartheid that kept up apart as people. We did! Our slogan said it all, "We Got South Africa Talking." It is important for me to stay connected to my roots. A tree dies without its roots. I am proudly South African and honoured to be accepted by America.

**Recently you were quoted as saying that South Africa is ready for a female president. You have dealt with patriarchy in your career. What advice do you have for today's young South African women?**

I often paraphrase Margaret Thatcher's quote to illustrate how valuable women are: if you want to know how to do a job, ask a man. If you want the job done, give it to a woman. We get the job done, because we know that we do not just represent ourselves but that our success is the success of all women. For black women, it goes further: we represent our race and women.

There are far too many highly qualified women in South Africa who could make great presidents. Yes, I have dealt with patriarchy in the corporate and media world.



**Trailblazer: Veteran journalist Felicia Mabaza-Suttle says it is no longer an honour to be 'the only woman'; the point is to create space at the table for more women to thrive**

But I realised that being among the first women sitting at the board and negotiating tables — my role was to deliver and to create a spot for another woman. Being "the only woman" is no longer an honour. It's lonely and brutal at the top. My favourite book, [which] I urge every woman to read, is *Games Mother Never Taught You* by Betty Lehan Harragan. It was my business bible. It is old, but the rules still apply.

**What angers you most about the South Africa of today from a political perspective?**

The images of utter anarchy and looting with beautiful South Africa in flames on the television screens were extremely disturbing. The reported greed and corruption I read about overseas and South African media is concerning.

What happened to the "South African Dream" we hoped for post-apartheid? Things seem to have deteriorated. I pray daily for our country. Poverty needs to be tackled fast. As Bob Marley sang: "A hungry man is an angry man."

Our people are hungry and angry, especially when they see headlines of greed and corruption among those in public service. As a young man told me once, "We will climb over your high electrified fences and take what we want." This is already happening. To the rich I say: practise our mantra of ubuntu and help lift others for a better society.

**You love music and dancing. Do you have a favourite genre?**

I love all types of music. I grew up in a musical family. My father Willie, played saxophone; my uncle Vela, played piano; and my other uncle, Early, was a renowned drummer and was married to Busi Mhlongo. I used to love listening to the practice jam sessions at my home in Soweto, where we had greats like Abdullah Ibrahim, Pat Matshikiza, Mankunku Ngozi, Barney Rachabane and many more. Both my grandmothers sang in the choir and I was the youngest member of the choir. I sing and dance to every genre: jazz, mbaqanga, kwaito, R&B, hymns, amapiano, you name it. My husband, Dr Earl Suttle, and I are always dancing.

**We know you never leave home without make-up. What don't South Africans know about you?**

I taught at a top finishing school and I conduct a lot of seminars on image and confidence. So, I just try to practise what I preach. A friend recently told me: "You have been practising Covid-19 sanitising practices before they were introduced." True, I am a germaphobe. I spend time cleaning and sanitising everything on the plane and in my hotel room. I even rinse utensils in restaurants because I have seen how they are handled in some restaurants. I do not eat cold food in restaurants: no sushi for me — too much touching. Let me stop before I reveal too much [laughs].

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