

Women of MMM



Yolande, Nonhlanhla and Zanele are just 3 of the 17 women working in the Mangaung Fire and Rescue Services unit



Keneilwe Ledwaba brightens the adrenaline filled office



Yolande Petersen has been a fire fighter for 10 years



Zanele Molakeng has 5 years under the belt and still going strong



Nhlanhla Hlabathi has also been saving lives for 5 years

FIGHTING FIRES IN A MALE-DOMINATED SPACE

Many a television series or movie portray the hardships that fire fighters face on the job, but when three women who have fought fires and extracted people from bloody scenes tell their stories, one cannot help but stare in wonder at their bravery. From not eating for days after working at a heart-rendering scene or going for days without sleep, these women, and more like them, have dedicated their lives to saving others' lives.

Yolande Petersen, Nonhlanhla Nhlabathi and Zanele Mokale are just three of the 17 women who work in Mangaung Fire and Rescue Services. Yolande has been working as a fire fighter since 2010; her passion, experiences and desire to pursue something different to the norm drove her to become a fire fighter, even though she had a fear of blood. "You cannot do this job if you do not have a passion for it. I was afraid of blood, but I was like, I'll overcome that totally within the service," she says with a chuckle.

With the sometimes unbearable experiences they face on the daily, it is their passion to help community that drives them to continue doing their work as best as they can. Nonhlanhla and Zanele were part of the team recruited in 2015, and despite other career options that would still allow them to save lives, they chose to fight the flames. Zanele wanted to be a paramedic but during her Basic Ambulance Course she got more information on fire fighting. After completing her BAC she went and did her Fire Fighter Course; just like Nonhlanhla who opted to save lives whilst fighting fires, instead of being a paramedic or traffic officer. "As a fire fighter, it meant I get to do all these jobs," says Nonhlanhla.

While fire fighters face similar challenges such as mental and emotional traumas from the scenes they regularly come across and the tight work schedules, women face added pressures and their ability to do their jobs is regularly questioned in

and out of the workplace. This is why after the hardest tasks; they take glory and celebrate amongst themselves, especially in moments when they prove those doubting them wrong. "I think men don't believe we can do this job. But then we show them that we are strong and capable enough to do this," said Zanele.

One of the things that helps them get through their days is the relationships they have cultivated in the station and within their different shifts. Even with the backchatting from the guys, they still have each other's backs. Pointing out the importance of teamwork in their field, Zanele said: "Teamwork in this job is a must because a lot of things can go wrong," with Yolande adding that even when words may be thrown around, they all rally around each when it is time to work.

In addition to loving their jobs, the ladies feel most proud when they have made a difference in their communities and are sometimes met with wonder from girl children when they realise women are part of the fire service. Despite what they encounter, Yolande gives a resounding yes when asked if they would encourage more women to get into the field; but only if it is something they are passionate about, Nonhlanhla reiterates.

Sleepless nights and haphazard eating habits aside, the trio agree that they wouldn't change the careers they are in. "It is a very challenging job, but I love it," says Zanele. Once again emphasising being driven by passion, Yolande says with conviction: "When I go out there, I go wholeheartedly. It doesn't matter how you feel in the morning but when you attend to a call, you have to be there mentally and physically."

In an office filled with adrenaline and fast-paced men and women in uniform, the Administrative Officer at the Bloemfontein Central Fire Station provides calm in the storm.

Whilst the fire fighters battle against flames in communities, Keneilwe Ledwaba is responsible for dousing flames as the Administrative Officer for Mangaung's Fire and Rescue Services. After working in units such as HR, Job Evaluation and Water and Sanitation, she finally found a home at the Fire department. Her experiences in the team has motivated her to take Disaster Management as a major in her current Bachelor's degree, and eventually study towards a PhD in Disaster Management.

Like her colleagues, Keneilwe believes that the only way to survive in this unit, even when behind the desk, is by having passion. "This kind of job needs someone who has passion, is dedicated and will go above and beyond to give services to the community because it is about saving lives," she said. This comes in handy when she has to organize items such as clothing for families whose lives have been ravaged by fires; as has often been the case.

As the person responsible for collecting statistics on all incidents responded to, Keneilwe is an instrumental part in the reporting of the unit. She says she has seen her presence light up the room, and occasionally provides support to the teams after tough calls.

"They are used to working hard and when they see this person coming in, they loosen up a bit or talk openly, because their work affects them personally," Keneilwe says about her relationship with the fire fighters.

A common thread that runs through these women's stories is the importance of not staying in a comfort zone, and surrounding yourself with a supportive team. Though the love they have for their jobs cannot be denied, the trio are adamant that the station having a psychiatrist on call would go a long way towards making it easier to cope with the trauma they witness daily.



ABOUT THIS SERIES:

This new series profiles *Women of MMM* and their professional journeys, in celebration of Women's Month.

Interviews are informal and lighthearted.

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