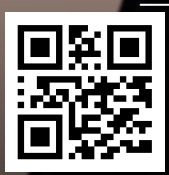


MAA

BioMagazine

WHEN
AFRICAN
WOMEN
RISE

ROBYNN LISA NIEMACK



www.ma-au.org

Leading an innovative approach to problem-solving, rooted in transnational collaboration and multi-generational strategies.

WELCOME TO
SPRING

FEATURE

Robynn Lisa Niemack

Behind the scene

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It's all about Robynn!

In this edition, we are proud to feature Robynn Neimack, a visionary leader redefining development across Africa. Her innovative approach to problem-solving, rooted in transnational collaboration and multi-generational strategies, is transforming communities and influencing sustainable growth. Robynn's dedication to creating inclusive solutions that empower individuals and uplift societies exemplifies the innovation of African women. As we celebrate spring and Heritage Month, her work serves as a reminder of the remarkable potential within our continent and the continuing legacy of those who strive to make a lasting difference.

Enjoy Reading



#WhenAfricanWomenRise
#WeRiseTogether

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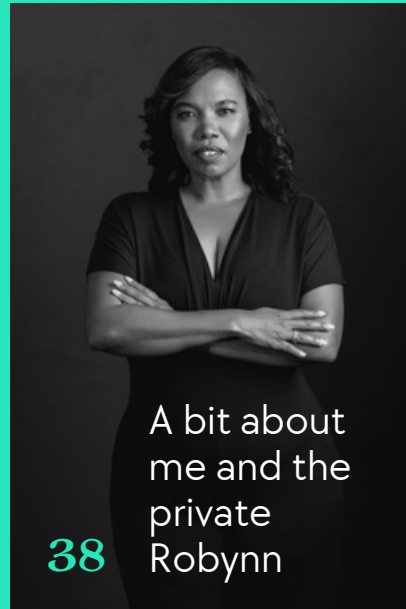
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A bit about
me and the
private
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**LITTLE
ROBYNN**

I was born on 19th November 1980 in Lusikisiki, which is now part of the Eastern Cape, but back then it was known as the Transkei. At that time, I was blissfully unaware of the racial tensions that gripped much of South Africa. The Transkei was an independent state under Chief Kaiser Daliwonga Matanzima (1976 to 1986) and the Honourable Bantu Holomisa (1987 to 1994), and some of us were spared the emotional and mental turmoil of harsh racial segregation seen elsewhere. In my village, Kwakana, and the wider Lusikisiki area, there was a sense of equality among us all.



Meet the family
*the apple didn't fall
far from the tree*

“One story about my grandfather that resonates deeply with me is his practice of opening his farmlands to correctional services. He engaged with prisoners, allowing them to fulfil their community service by working on the farm. Learning about this made me realise that my inclination towards community service and social responsibility isn’t a recent development; I’m simply continuing a legacy that has been in place for generations.”

My mother was an unmarried social worker who worked for Durban Child Welfare. When she returned to work in Durban, I remained with my grandmother, Lillian Niemack. Granny was the village’s granny, known for her gardening prowess of heart of generosity and peaceful nature. Family stories tell of how she and my late grandfather, who passed away in 1958, would share their harvest with the villagers. This principle of gleaning, where villagers were welcome to collect food, was established long before my grandfather's death. I grew up helping with the harvest, always aware that a portion would be given to others.

Our family also ran a small shop at home, managed by my mum's eldest brother, Winston, and my grandmother. This blend of entrepreneurship and social responsibility was a significant part of my upbringing.

My granny, parents, and cousins and
Qawukeni, Lusikisiki in the background



One story about my grandfather that resonates deeply with me is his practice of opening his farmlands to correctional services. He engaged with prisoners, allowing them to fulfil their community service by working on the farm. Learning about this made me realise that my inclination towards community service and social responsibility isn't a recent development; I'm simply continuing a legacy that has been in place for generations.

I often feel more connected to my mother's side of the family because they raised me, and their influence is profound. My mum's siblings have led diverse and impactful lives. My aunt Muriel was a renowned nurse in Durban, celebrated for her exceptional care. Some patients wouldn't undergo surgery unless she was on duty. Then there's my aunt Iris, a dedicated teacher who began in rural schools in the Eastern and Northern Cape. She had a passion for special needs education and earned her master's degree in the field. Her thesis was so outstanding that it became a model at the University of Durban-Westville. She even received a scholarship to study in the U.S. and taught in Denmark, becoming the academic beacon of our family. Unmarried and childless, she devoted herself entirely to her family and career.

My mum, on the other hand, was a social worker. As a child, I often accompanied her when she had to remove children from dysfunctional homes to place them in safer environments. This exposure to her work left a lasting impact on me. I remember wanting her to adopt a little boy we encountered, feeling an intense connection with him. Although I am my mother's only child, on my father's side, I am the third of seven siblings.

My mother had two other brothers—Uncle Mike, who is still with us, and Uncle Godfrey, a highly skilled panel beater in KwaZulu-Natal. Uncle Godfrey took me on camping and fishing trips. He and Uncle Winston gave me a profound understanding of the male dynamic within our family. Although my mum was a single parent, the presence of my uncles as nurturers and male role models was crucial. This reinforced my belief that men play a fundamental role in the African family structure, even when single mothers are the primary caregivers.

My childhood was enriched by these experiences, and the values instilled in me by my family's strong sense of community, education, and social responsibility continue to guide my life today.

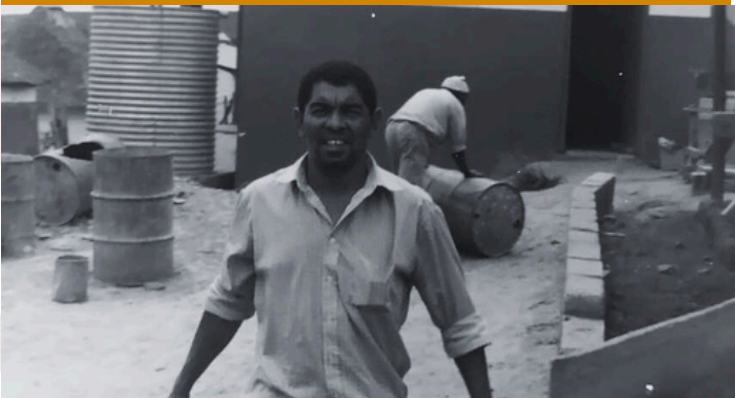
My eldest uncle, Winston, ran the shop at home and was also a disciplinarian. However, what stood out most was his collective love for all children. Though he had his own, I was part of the homestead, grew up engaging his 5 children as siblings more than cousins. I often recall how, when he returned from the wholesale with stock for the shop, children from every corner of the village would run to help him. We would all unpack the 'bakkie' together—his children, me, and the village children. Once we were done, he would gather us all, and we would share the same reward: brown bread and Kool-Aid. In those moments, there was no distinction between his children and the others.



My Mum, Edna Niemack



Auntie Iris



My uncle Winston at our family shop



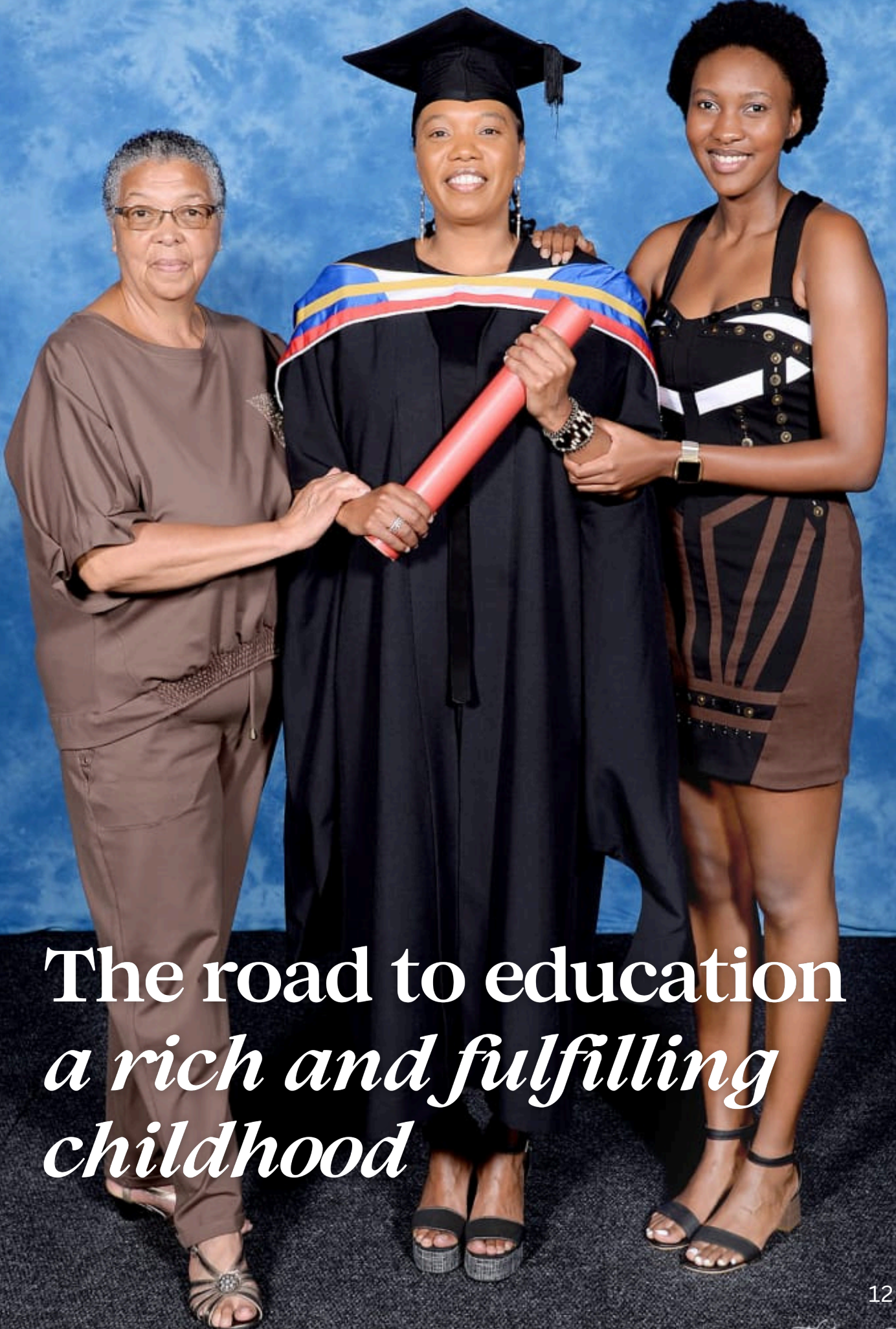
My uncles, from left - Godfrey and Mike



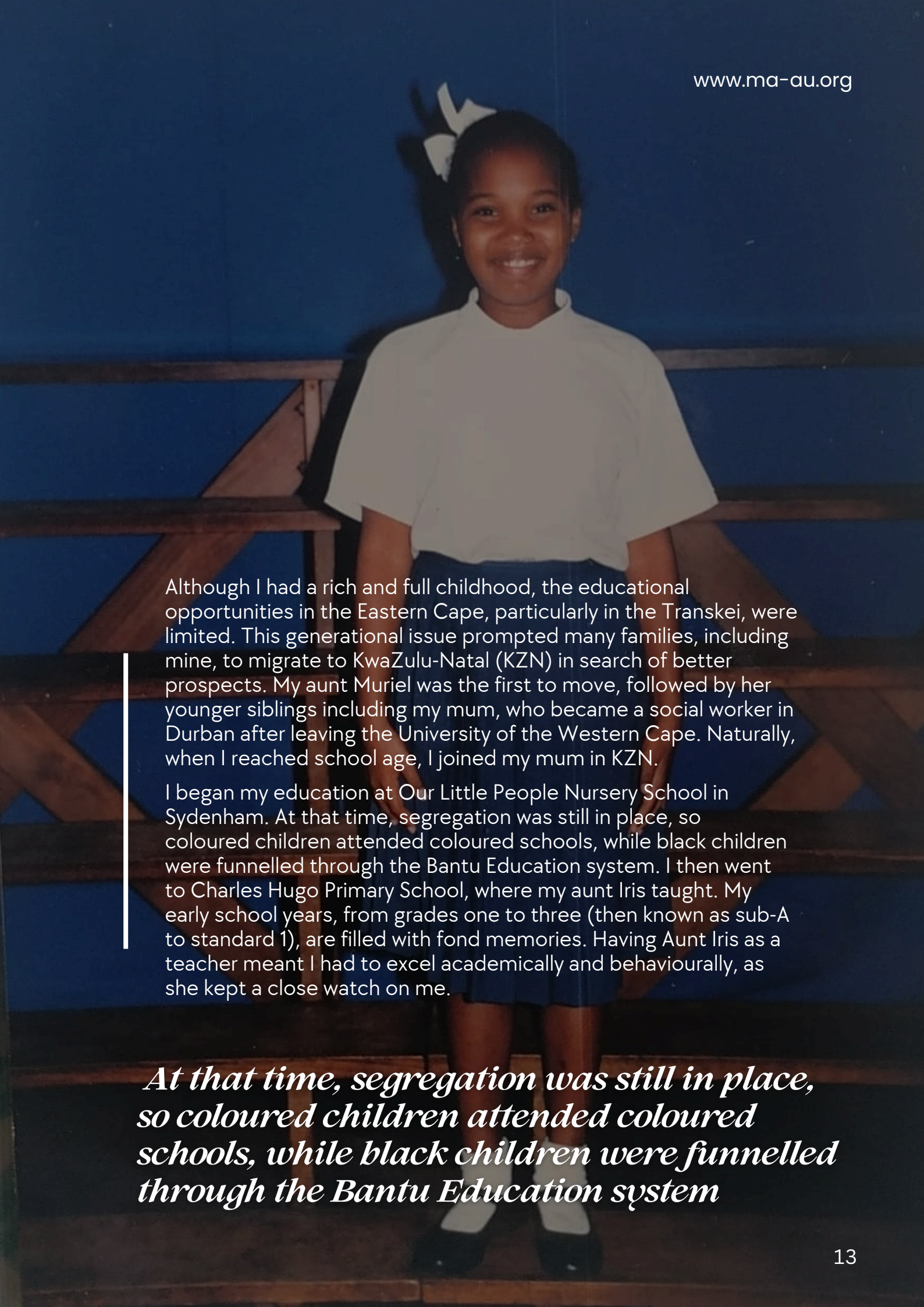
My great grandmother, Minnie Harriette Gcaleka with my mother's older siblings



My grandparents, Lillian and Teddy Niemack



**The road to education
*a rich and fulfilling
childhood***



Although I had a rich and full childhood, the educational opportunities in the Eastern Cape, particularly in the Transkei, were limited. This generational issue prompted many families, including mine, to migrate to KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in search of better prospects. My aunt Muriel was the first to move, followed by her younger siblings including my mum, who became a social worker in Durban after leaving the University of the Western Cape. Naturally, when I reached school age, I joined my mum in KZN.

I began my education at Our Little People Nursery School in Sydenham. At that time, segregation was still in place, so coloured children attended coloured schools, while black children were funnelled through the Bantu Education system. I then went to Charles Hugo Primary School, where my aunt Iris taught. My early school years, from grades one to three (then known as sub-A to standard 1), are filled with fond memories. Having Aunt Iris as a teacher meant I had to excel academically and behaviourally, as she kept a close watch on me.

At that time, segregation was still in place, so coloured children attended coloured schools, while black children were funnelled through the Bantu Education system

1 admit, i had a knack for fighting – but only when trouble found me

Academically, I thrived early on, winning awards and gaining the attention of headmasters. However, there was another side to me. Although I don't see it as a flaw, publicly, I'll admit it: I was a fighter. I didn't seek out trouble, but if it found me, I stood my ground. My sense of justice and inclination toward defending others began early. In grade one, I got into my first fight at school. When I got home and told my mum that someone had slapped me, she asked what I did in response. When I said I did nothing, she responded, "What was wrong? Were your hands tied behind your back?" "Say again? Were your hands tied behind your back?" my mum repeated. I said no, and she responded, "So then you did nothing?" At that moment, I understood that I couldn't live a life where I didn't stand up for myself.



Drum majorettes at Our Little People Nursery School in 1985.



Charles Hugo Class in 1987



Head Prefect at Port Shepstone High School in 1998

Growing up, I quickly became known for standing up not only for myself but also for others, especially those who were more vulnerable. My cousin, who attended special needs classes at our school, was often the target of ridicule. I made it clear that anyone who tried to bully him would have to face me. By the time I was six to eight years old, I had already decided that I wouldn't tolerate bullying in any form. This strong sense of justice and the urge to defend others became a consistent theme throughout my life, deeply influenced by the values instilled in me by my family.

As I moved to a different school in grade four, my competitive nature began to emerge. I became rivals with two friends, one of whom is still my friend today and is now a postdoctoral researcher in Canada. We often laugh about our childhood rivalry, where the competition was so intense that just one point could separate us in class rankings. We also shared a love for singing, and it was during this time that I realised I could be both strong and beautiful.

One memory from primary school stands out vividly. A teacher once called me selfish, which deeply upset me because I was raised in a family that valued selflessness and social responsibility. My mother advised me to address the issue with the teacher in a respectful manner, which was a daunting task for a child more accustomed to expressing anger physically than verbally. This experience taught me the importance of articulating my grievances calmly and respectfully, a lesson that has stayed with me throughout my life.

In 1993, I finished primary school, just as South Africa was on the brink of transitioning to democracy in 1994. I was part of the first cohort of black children allowed to attend Model C schools, and I enrolled at Grosvenor Girls' High School on the Bluff. This new environment offered opportunities like synchronised swimming and other activities that were unavailable in township schools.

My upbringing was deeply rooted in faith. My mother gave her heart to the Lord when I was three years old and began attending Durban Christian Centre, where my spiritual journey began. The church, led by Dr. Fred Roberts and his wife Nellie, was a diverse community that welcomed people of all races, including whites. This exposure to a diverse and inclusive community continued in other areas of my life, such as my involvement in gymnastics, where my coaches were also white. These experiences shaped my understanding of what a truly inclusive community should look like.

At Grosvenor Girls' High School, where I started in 1993, I quickly found myself at the centre of conflict. On my first day, two girls singled me out and warned me not to think I could "take over the school." I was baffled because all I wanted was to embrace the new opportunities before me. Despite my best efforts to stay out of trouble, it seemed to follow me wherever I went.

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AFRIKANER WEERSTANDS BEWEGING

Creator: ITN | Credit: ITN

“In grade nine, the same two girls who had targeted me earlier were in my Afrikaans class. They would move my bag to sit where I sat, and I later discovered that their fathers were members of the far-right Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB). It was clear that I had been marked.”

One of my early struggles at Grosvenor was with Afrikaans, a language I wasn't very familiar with, having come from the Eastern Cape. In grade nine, the same two girls who had targeted me earlier were in my Afrikaans class. They would move my bag to sit where I sat, and I later discovered that their fathers were members of the far-right Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB). It was clear that I had been marked.

One day, when the Afrikaans teacher asked me to read aloud, the girls laughed at my struggle. After class, I confronted them and ended up in a fight with the larger of the two, who was strong and an accomplished shot-put athlete. I managed to overpower her and warned her not to mess with me again. This confrontation settled our conflict but didn't prevent future issues with others.

Later in grade nine, a group of girls from Wentworth decided to target me. They would write derogatory things about me on desks and boards. I spoke to the teacher, Miss Smith, who said she would give the perpetrators detention if I could name them. Knowing that detention wouldn't stop them, I decided to confront the group directly. When one girl addressed me using foul language, I lost my temper and choked her until she turned blue. Realising the severity of my actions, I stopped just in time. We ended up in the principal's office, where the girl denied provoking me.

I knew what was coming after the fight at school. When I got home, I told my mum, "They're going to get rid of me because of what I did." She knew I didn't seek out trouble, so she was prepared to stand by me, but I was certain I'd face expulsion. Before that could happen, I transferred to another school, though I'll get to that later.

The next day at school, someone warned me that the girl's father was looking for me. Sure enough, when I got off the bus that afternoon, there he was, waiting under a tree. I had two choices: I could run, though he'd likely catch me, or I could stand my ground. I chose to stand my ground. He threatened me, and I calmly told him, "If I'm not home when my mum gets home, she'll alert my dad, and he'll come looking for me. You'll be in serious trouble if you've got me." When he asked who my dad was, I responded, "Michael Dawson." At that, he got into his car and left.

"Throughout these conflicts, I learned the importance of standing up for myself and others, even if my methods were sometimes extreme."

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The Dawsons are from Wentworth, and while I don't carry their surname, I carry their street cred. My dad was well-respected for many reasons—he appeared in TV ads and print media and always commanded attention when he walked into a room. My uncle, his older brother, started as a cop and rose to prominence in the legal field in KwaZulu-Natal. My aunts were tough, too and could take on anyone, no matter their size or strength. While I don't recommend using such tactics, they've worked on multiple occasions.

My personality is a blend of both sides of my family, and I'm grateful I was raised by my mum's family. If I'd spent more time with my paternal side, I might have ended up in serious trouble. Grosvenor Girls' High had started as an inspiring place because of its diversity, but it soon became clear that I was going to be expelled.

After we moved to Port Shepstone on the lower South Coast, I started at Port Shepstone High School in grade 10. This school became the foundation of who I am today. My headmaster, Mr. James Black, originally from Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), brought a fresh perspective, unburdened by South Africa's historical baggage. He once shared at our prefect ordination that from the moment he saw me, he believed I had the potential to be head prefect. He saw a fire in me and knew that, with the right guidance, it could be channelled into something positive.

At Port Shepstone High, I met a great friend, Rabia Shihab, daughter of the legendary South African musician Ibrahim Khalil Shihab (was also known as Chris Schilder). Despite our different backgrounds—me being Christian and her Muslim—we instantly clicked. Rabia's family had travelled extensively due to her dad's music career, and we bonded over our shared experience of being new. I learned much about Eid and especially enjoyed her mother's incredible butter biscuits.

Port Shepstone High offered a fresh start, free from the conflicts that had marked my earlier school years. It was a place where I could truly thrive, academically, socially, and personally.

In grade 10, I auditioned for the school play and landed a lead role in *The Sound of Music*, playing the Reverend Mother. Although I didn't take drama as a subject, my teacher, Mrs. Williams, saw the drama queen in me from the start and encouraged me to pursue it.

Despite my initial hatred for Afrikaans, my time at Port Shepstone High seemed guided by providence. The hostile students from my previous school were replaced by supportive Afrikaans teachers like Mrs. Du Plessis and Mrs. Markram, who encouraged me to enter the Stofel Nienaber Riedenaarskompetisie, an Afrikaans oratory competition. Reluctantly, I agreed, mainly because I liked my teachers. To my surprise, I won the local round, then the regional, and eventually placed in the top three at the provincial level. Overcoming my fear of Afrikaans helped me appreciate a culture I once saw as oppressive. This shift in perspective was significant for me.

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Mr. James Black, Headmaster at Port Shepstone High School

In grade 12, I became the first black deputy head girl of a Model C school at Port Shepstone High School, a prestigious achievement. Wearing my blazer adorned with the honour, I attended an English conference where I encountered my former English teacher from Grosvenor Girls' High. She was astonished to see me in that position, initially thinking I had borrowed someone else's blazer. When she asked Mr. Black, he confirmed that I was indeed the deputy head girl, affirming the faith he had in me from the beginning.

My journey is marked by milestones, each bearing the names of those who believed in me. As deputy head girl, I played a unique role in disciplinary hearings. After detentions and black book entries, the final step was a hearing before the prefect body. I had a knack for making students admit their wrongdoings by asking them about themselves and their motivations. This approach often led to emotional breakthroughs, highlighting my deep interest in people. These experiences, combined with my love for justice and my ability to connect with others, have shaped who I am today.

My deep interest in people has profoundly influenced the way I parent. I strive to be a present and engaged mother, not perfect, but always involved. After high school, I was at my peak, making headlines and receiving accolades. However, I made a pivotal decision not to study full-time immediately after school, which, in hindsight, marked the beginning of some of my toughest challenges.

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Here marks the
beginning my long
journey
*toward discovering my
career*

Living in a small coastal town, I initially aspired to become a criminal lawyer, inspired by watching Matlock with my mum. The idea of cross-examining people and bringing wrongdoers to justice fascinated me. I enrolled at UNISA to study law while working at my high school. This arrangement was challenging because the transition from high school to university requires a strong support system, which I lacked. My uncle, a criminal lawyer, advised me against pursuing this path, suggesting I observe his work firsthand. What I discovered was disheartening: the cases felt impersonal, and there was little focus on the individuals behind them. I realised I needed to know the people and their stories. My emotional connection to justice meant I would either become a lawyer who cries for every sob story or an enraged advocate against criminals, neither of which seemed sustainable in the long run. The legal field often tests the technicalities of cases rather than seeking true justice, which conflicted with my values.

Realising that law wasn't the right path for me, I switched to a bachelor's degree in communications which I continued studying part-time. After working as a teacher's assistant at Port Shepstone High School, I joined the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in Ezingolweni in 2001 during South Africa's demarcation adjustments. This role deepened my understanding of democracy, government structures, and citizen participation, complementing my socially conscious upbringing.

Among The Stars

Despite gaining valuable knowledge, I still harboured dreams of being in the limelight. From a young age, I had performed on church and school stages, singing and acting, and I was drawn to the world of television. In 2001, I moved to Johannesburg with aspirations of working in TV. My first encounter with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) came through a course run by Media Concepts, where I was taught by well-known figures like Tracy Going, a former Morning Live presenter, and Kimberleigh Stark, known for her roles in Tropical Heat, Generations, and even Kideo.

This period was a journey of self-discovery, understanding my strengths and navigating the complexities of my career aspirations. While I didn't pursue law, my communication skills and interest in people remained central to my pursuits.

During this time, Natasha Sutherland, who was co-founder of Stark Raving Management, became part of my journey as well. I was learning from people I had seen on television and was doing something I genuinely loved. I created my showreel and maintained contact with industry professionals. I always made it a point to align myself with the influential figures in any room. Kimberleigh Stark, who became my agent, helped me land several auditions, though I never secured a role. I did, however, come close with a Coca-Cola advert that fell through at the last minute.

I made many friends in the entertainment industry, from musicians to actors and producers. Despite being starstruck, I was always asking questions beyond the arts, like, "What is the industry doing for the sustainability of livelihoods?" I was curious about how music rights organisations were contributing beyond just holding workshops. These questions stayed with me as I navigated the industry.

When my ambitions in the arts didn't materialise, I started working at Truworths in Sandton as a retail casual. One day, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, the renowned musician, walked into the store. I approached her differently from other customers, saying, "When you need help, I'll be standing next to the changing room on the left." This led to a conversation where I shared my dreams. Her husband, Dr Tiny Minga, started talking with me, but nothing came of it. Later, at an advocacy campaign where Yvonne was performing, she remembered me and called me on stage for a brief moment, which was a small highlight in my journey.


**An unexpected turn –
mummyhood**

*April Rae became the
centre of my world*

At 21, I discovered I was pregnant with my daughter, April Rae, which drastically changed my life. I moved back to the lower South Coast, where I had a strong support system. My grandmother was still alive, and my mum's sister acted as a deputy mum. My mother has always been a pillar of strength for me.

I discovered my pregnancy late, so I only had a two-month pregnancy. With no experience with younger siblings and a lot happening at once, I felt overwhelmed and believed my life was over. With only two weeks to confinement, I was working for Service SETA, a skills development and training parastatal. I worked right up until the day I went into labour. On 12th April, after carrying boxes for an event to the Royal Hotel in Durban, I went into labour. My boss then, Margaret Du Plessis, was supportive and understanding of the turmoil I was experiencing. Having a job, even as an intern, provided a sense of self-worth. I decided to give my daughter the best I could, despite my limited resources. She would see a paediatrician instead of going to a clinic, and she would have a custom-made cot, even if I couldn't afford it. April was mine, and I wanted the best for her.

When I went into labour, my Aunt Iris, who had decided not to have children, sprang into action. She and another aunt, Gertie, took me to McCord's Hospital in a car we called Lizzie. At the hospital, I was terrified by the screams of another woman in labour. However, once in the ward, I was surrounded by the best midwives and assistants. As I reached the final stage of labour, the staff began singing hymns around my bed. Despite the pain, this worshipful atmosphere gave a profound sense of peace. April was born healthy, and the singing around my bed remains a cherished memory.



Baby April Rae in her granny's arms

April and I

After a short hospital stay, I returned home to Aunt Iris's place and began motherhood without taking maternity leave. Despite having stitches and facing numerous challenges, I felt a renewed sense of purpose.

After April was born, I had to return to work quickly. Without a car, I walked all the way up Jacob's Ladder, still recovering from childbirth, to reach the bus station. Having no experience raising other children, I had to figure out how to express milk to ensure my daughter had enough during the day. This marked the beginning of my journey into motherhood, defined by a deep sense of responsibility.

As April grew, her personality blossomed. By the age of three, she had a strong vocabulary and a mind of her own. I connected with her deeply during this stage. I remember her confidently reciting the alphabet in Shelly Centre Mall, impressing everyone with her tiny voice. She was feisty too, with chubby cheeks that people loved to pinch, but she would firmly tell them, "Can't you just talk to me properly? Must you touch me? Don't touch me." She was her own person, and it was a beautiful revelation for me. Motherhood truly set in when I realised how protective I felt. An instinct kicked in, making me willing to do anything to protect her. This instinct shaped my professional style as well, making me unapologetically protective, nurturing, and driven by a deep sense of responsibility.

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One day, I heard that the son of an internationally acclaimed film producer had drowned in a swimming pool, and I was determined to prevent such a tragedy. I decided that April would learn to swim at an early age. She took to the water naturally and began swimming competitively. Swimming became a significant part of our lives, requiring early morning and evening training sessions, travelling for swim meets, and forming a new community around the sport.

Being a "pool deck mum" meant our social life revolved around swimming. While others attended social gatherings, we were at the pool, training and competing. Swimming consumed a lot of time and effort, but it provided April with a unique skill and set her on a distinctive path. This journey not only shaped her but also deepened our bond and added a new dimension to our lives.

Motherhood, with all its challenges and responsibilities, became the core of my existence, influencing every aspect of my life and career. April's growth and achievements became my greatest joy and source of strength, driving me to be the best version of myself for her.

Through swimming, I also experienced the richness of diverse relationships. It wasn't just about racial harmony but about forming genuine connections with people from different backgrounds. April and her friends, like Jeandre Joubert, grew up together, wrapped in the same towels, competing, and supporting each other. This journey was not just about raising an athlete but about embracing a community that shared our values and experiences. These relationships have enriched our lives, proving that sports can break down barriers and build lasting bonds.

**Swimming
taught me the
importance of
community,
perseverance,
and the
unbreakable
bond
between a
mother and
her child**



April swam competitively for 14 years until she decided to stop at the end of high school, having devoted a significant part of her life to the sport. She was incredible, with breaststroke as her signature style. I used to call her my Black Penny Heyns. One memorable morning, I was combing April's hair while watching Penny Heyns being interviewed on Morning Live. I saw the awe in April's eyes as she watched, a look I had never seen directed at me. Inspired by her admiration, I decided to bring Penny Heyns to the lower South Coast for a development clinic for April and her swimming friends.

I reached out to Penny, and with the support of the district municipality and Margate Swimming Club, organised a weekend clinic. There was a powerful moment during the clinic when Penny and April stood together, both standing with their feet in the same unique way, a stance April had been teased about. Penny, sensing April's insecurity reassured her, saying, "you stand like this because you're a breaststroker." This validation from her idol profoundly impacted April's confidence and posture.

April's journey through school mirrored my own experiences. She started school at five, a year younger than her peers, and like her mum, got into trouble in grade 1 for hitting other kids. When she faced detention in grade one, she felt scared and out of place. Unsure how to handle it, I turned to prayer and the reading of scripture for guidance and was reminded how Jesus handled the conflict in the Garden of Gethsemane, which was to address both the perpetrator and the provocation. So, I spoke to her headmaster, questioning the incidents that led to her hitting other children, and suggested updating the school's code of conduct to include rules against provocation.

So, I spoke to her headmaster, questioning the incidents that led to her hitting other children, and suggested updating the school's code of conduct to include rules against provocation. This experience reinforced my belief in seeking divine guidance in parenting and highlighted the importance of advocating for systemic change



Our journey and ongoing pursuit of holistic development have shown me the importance of perseverance, adaptability, and the unbreakable bond between a mother and her child. As I continue to grow and learn, I find reassurance that God's sovereignty, providence, and redemptive master plan secure our place of purpose and significance as His children.

April's swimming career introduced us to a community where racial barriers faded away. We developed deep, meaningful relationships with families from various backgrounds, supporting each other's children in their athletic pursuits. This experience enriched our social lives and showed me the power of sports in breaking down barriers and fostering unity.

When COVID-19 struck, April continued to focus to her studies. She graduated with a Higher Certificate in Health and Exercise Science from HFPA and then pursued a Bachelor of Public Health at IIE MSA. Over time, she continued to demonstrate her capability and independence, allowing me to step back. Her sound mind, biblical worldview, and clear stance on various issues reassured me that I've successfully instilled important values in her.



Now back to me!
*toward discovering my
career*

After completing my first online learning course with Oral Roberts University, which emphasised whole-person development, I realised my brain was still sharp despite the unfinished aspects of my academic journey. I reconnected with a high school friend, Busisiwe Madikizela-Theu a PhD scholar and leader in the social work field who reminded me of my potential and suggested I connect with Dr. Talifani Kubana, an academic mentor and supervisor.

Dr. Kubana, impressed by my vision for African development and biblical principles, vouched for me, enabling me to fast-track my entry into Regent Business School's RPL process. I was placed in a postgraduate diploma in management programme, recognising my experience and previous short courses. The journey was tough, especially in economics, but I persevered and succeeded, even earning distinctions.

When I graduated, with my mum and April present, I realised the importance of not just following a linear path but also expanding my network. I applied to Ducere Global Business School and Rome Business School, aiming to bridge African and Western educational perspectives. I secured a partial scholarship by emphasising that Rome, with its imperial history, had much to learn from Africa. My MBA class included diverse students, including five Africans from different countries, enriching my global network.

Throughout my studies, I faced challenges, including balancing work and education without study leave. At one point, overwhelmed by an assignment, I requested an extension from my lecturer, who granted it without penalty. This taught me the importance of self-compassion, which in turn invites compassion from others. I later achieved 94% on that assignment.

My coursework often focused on Zambia rather than South Africa, drawn to the nation for reasons I didn't fully understand at the time. This journey reinforced my belief in the power of compassion and love in development work. Reflecting on my own journey, I pursued other diverse learning opportunities.

I completed at Rome Business School earning me a Global Master's in Business Administration (MBA). This qualification didn't just add to my credentials but significantly refined my strategic thinking, providing methodologies, frameworks, and scholarly insights that honed my approach to problem-solving and development. The language and concepts I now use, such as "transnational, multi-generational strategy," were born from this rigorous academic engagement.

A transnational strategy, as I learned, involves taking a concept originating in one context and adapting it to various other contexts without losing its essence. This strategy underpins the Joy Movement, a flagship project I run under Impact Africa Strategies aimed at promoting health and well-being on all 8 dimensions of wellness: spiritual, mental/emotional, physical, social, occupational/vocational, intellectual, financial and environmental.

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The birth of joy
movement
worship workout

The Joy Movement, which began during the COVID-19 lockdown, was born from my frustration during the first lockdown. With churches and gyms closed, I turned to music and movement, creating fitness routines set to gospel music. This "worship workout" uplifted my soul while I exercised, and it led to the birth of the Joy Movement. The message of the joy of faith in Jesus Christ that moves through the music became central. As a female advocate for positive societal change, I am also tired of women being objectified and verbally abused through music that is on high rotation on the international charts. I am even more tired of us dancing and singing along to it and that is why I decided that I would no longer dance to anything disrespectful towards women. I began dreaming of choreography, waking up to embed it in my body. This gift, given to me during such a challenging time, needed to be shared beyond my living room.

When the regulations lifted and gyms reopened, a popular fitness club invited me to teach a class. I informed the fitness manager that while I would teach dance fitness, it would be gospel music based. He agreed, and to my surprise, people from all backgrounds—Hindus, atheists, and Muslims—joined the class. They moved energetically to the Christian music, seemingly unaffected by the lyrics. My prayer shifted from focusing solely on physical fitness to bringing joy into people's lives.

Participants shared how the class helped them through tough times, including suicidal thoughts. An advertising executive once told me, "I don't know what that is, but there's something here." This feedback confirmed the value of what I was doing. I anticipated complaints about the lyrics and received a few, but when management approached me, I offered to step down if necessary. To my surprise, non-Christian members protested, saying they would leave if I did. The class remained, consistently drawing significant numbers.

The Joy Movement started in that gym, but it has since evolved. It is now about more than just physical movement; it is a revolutionary movement promoting joy as a catalyst for health and well-being. Joy on a personal level, shared joy within families, and communal joy. I believe that the joy of the Lord is our strength, and when our joy is depleted, we feel weaker. Thus, the Joy Movement aims to strengthen individuals and communities through joy.

Joy Movement Africa

now a continental movement

Joy Movement's expression in South Africa, where April serves as an advisor, focuses on the interplay between workplace justice and employee wellbeing. In Zambia, the focus shifts to children's health under the guidance of another advisor, Yangoy, Mulangi, a physiotherapy graduate who is pursuing a Master of Public Health through Lusaka Apex Medical University, while in Nigeria, Divine Mariazu drives the link between healthcare and innovation. These diverse applications showcase the flexibility and adaptability of the Joy Movement's foundational principles across different contexts.

My network of advisors, all under 30, illustrates the multi-generational aspect of our strategy. April (22) in South Africa, Yangoy (27) in Zambia, and Divine (22) in Nigeria are dynamic young professionals whose unique insights drive our research, thought leadership, and initiatives. This approach aligns with my belief that legacy isn't just passed on at death but actively shaped and imparted during one's lifetime. I provide these advisors with professional development opportunities, help them leverage my networks, and ensure their presence and contributions are recognised.

Joy Movement serves as a flagship project under Impact Africa Strategies aims to empower young professionals to make impactful decisions, enhancing their belief in their potential. My engagement with classmates from diverse contexts during my MBA enriched my understanding of global perspectives and strategies, which I now apply to African development.



Back to my connection with Zambia

My connection to Zambia emerged from a compelling sense of purpose. Conversations with individuals like Nsamu Moonga, a Zambian music therapist pursuing a PhD at the University of Pretoria, revealed that Zambia's history of early independence and its cyclical journey through hope, depression, and reconstruction, creating a unique sense of resilience and optimism. This backdrop drew me to Zambia as a fertile ground for impactful development work.

After completing my MBA in November 2023, I decided to celebrate my birthday with a trip to Lusaka. The only person I knew there was Miriam Ngoma, a fellow Regent Business School graduate who had faced personal hardships during her studies. We bonded over our shared experiences, and I booked my flight and hotel, messaging Miriam about my visit. Coincidentally, the hotel I chose was near her home.

Upon arriving in Zambia, I was immediately struck by the peace and hospitality. Miriam and her family welcomed me with immense generosity, embodying the heart of Zambian culture. During my stay, I explored Lusaka's nightlife, mingled with locals, and visited the Presidential Memorial Park, where Zambia's founding fathers are buried. Their legacy of fatherhood and faith resonated deeply with me, especially in contrast to the political legacy I was familiar with in South Africa. This experience affirmed my belief in the crucial role of father figures in the African story.

Although I didn't have all the meetings I had hoped for, my visit left a lasting impression on me. I knew I had to return, driven by a newfound conviction and connection to Zambia. After my trip, I began reaching out to people on LinkedIn, particularly focusing on public health.

Lusaka Apex Medical University collaborates With Joy Movement

Zambia has become my favourite market and recently, Joy Movement collaborated with Lusaka Apex Medical University on a study focused on children's health and well-being, particularly around age seven. The study aims to understand how the ecosystem supports children's milestones and to create content and products that stimulate their development.

During my last visit to Zambia, I expected a small meeting but was met with a boardroom with the universities' senior management. This warm reception accentuated Zambia's embrace of impactful initiatives. We discussed the importance of nurturing children from a young age. This study also aligns with the Lusaka Fit Futures research project that Lusaka Apex Medical University is conducting in collaboration with The Arctic University of Norway.

We also explored the concept of nutraceuticals, focusing on the medicinal benefits of widely consumed foods. For example, garlic, a natural antibiotic, featured in various cuisines, was highlighted as a potential component of our research. By combining African indigenous plants with universally consumed foods, we aim to create holistic, natural health solutions.

My journey from completing my MBA to establishing the Joy Movement has been about refining strategic thinking and applying it to real-world contexts. The transnational, multi-generational strategy we employ shows how adaptable our principles are across different environments. Zambia, with its unique potential, has become a key part of this journey, reflecting my commitment to promoting joy and well-being across Africa.

This journey has been incredible, and I knew that our research on children's health would be well-placed in Zambia. The Joy Movement continues to grow, emphasising the holistic health benefits of widely consumed foods and exploring new ways to promote health and well-being.

What drew me to Zambia

My initial interest in Zambia was sparked by the work Dr. Voddie Baucham. His teachings and books, along with those of fellow pastor, author, and educator Dr. Conrad Mbewe, drew me to the African Christian University. Their influence has profoundly shaped my understanding of the world from a biblical worldview.

When I arrived in Zambia, Miriam and I went to visit her mother in the hospital. During our visit, I mentioned my interest in visiting the African Christian University. Her sister Rachel made a quick phone call and arranged for me to meet with Mr Tembo, the Dean of Student Affairs. At the university, I expressed my admiration for Dr. Baucham and Dr. Mbewe and casually mentioned my desire to take first-year courses just to be taught by them.

After learning more about my background and interests, Mr Tembo had a different suggestion. He encouraged me to consider pursuing a PhD under the supervision of Dr. Mbewe, who is currently serving as the Dean of Theology. I was astonished. Although he was out of the country at the time, Mr Tembo promised to discuss it with them.

That Sunday, I attended Kabwata Baptist Church and was pleasantly surprised to see Dr. Mbewe preaching. Although I didn't get to meet him in person, his presence reinforced my belief that I was on the right path.

After returning to South Africa, I received a WhatsApp message from Mr Tembo, informing me that Dr Mbewe was keen to be my supervisor and asking me to send my doctoral research proposal directly to him.

This was a dream come true. These men are not just academics; they are true servants of my Saviour and King. They are respected husbands, fathers, African leaders, pastors, and authors. Having the opportunity to be guided by them will be an incredible honour. Now, I'm drafting my doctoral research proposal, merging insights from my MBA at Rome Business School and my experience in socio-economic development field. The proposal focuses on the impact of reformed faith-based social entrepreneurship on economic empowerment and holistic prosperity in the church and African communities.

Pursuing this from a biblical worldview, under the guidance of my favourite scholars, sharpens me both spiritually and intellectually. It's remarkable to think that three years ago, I didn't even qualify for such a path. Now, with a master's degree, I'm preparing for a bible-based doctorate. This is truly the hand of God's providence; I could never have orchestrated this on my own.



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I've been fortunate to have a supportive network that has helped me in unimaginable ways. For instance, I needed a participatory action research tool but lacked the funding to develop one. Fortunately, Natasha Anderson and the ForgeX team offered their services pro bono, supporting our cause. This collaborative effort is crucial for our work as Africans; we must support each other's work rather than compete.

My preferred research methodology is participatory action research, which accelerates stakeholder buy-in. By designing our tools, we can ask relevant, context-sensitive questions that improve overall outcomes in the long term. For example, integrating financial empowerment with health initiatives is crucial because financial stability impacts nutrition and overall health. We are networking across sectors to develop integrated solutions, teaching people better life choices.



**A bit
about
me**
*Private
Robynn*

As for my personal life, I'm not married, but I believe in the institution of marriage and hope to be married one day. I almost got married in 2021 but called it off two months before the wedding. During that period, I felt unsettled and didn't want to enter a marriage I wasn't ready for, especially after having made so many mistakes in my life. I'm grateful I pulled back, as it allowed me to grow significantly. My perspective on God, marriage, family, and myself deepened during that time. I prayed deeply, confronting my ego and asking God for guidance, recognising that perhaps He wanted something different or at a different time for either of us.

I consider myself old-fashioned in my thinking; I am a homebody who expresses love through cooking for my family. Despite my professional and academic growth, at my core, I remain a child of, a disciple of Jesus Christ, a mother to April, and a daughter to Michael and Edna, though my father has never lived with us. I respect my elders greatly and believe in the blessings of honouring one's parents and their siblings. I strive to support my family whenever there is a need, often being the first to provide solutions, despite the challenges and feelings of being stretched and overwhelmed sometimes. As an African, I do not see supporting family as a burden but as a privilege.

Reflecting on my past, I was initially drawn to and attracted to "bad boys." I didn't see myself as the prettiest girl, but I had a girl-next-door charm, could dance, and had a way with people, which attracted a certain type of popular guy. Unfortunately, these relationships were influenced by the fractures in my relationship with my father and fed the wrong parts of me.

When April was younger, I openly discussed purity with her, not because I was pure, but because I understood the importance of spiritual hygiene and soul integrity. I lost my virginity at a very early age and was not married, a path I do not advocate for now. I emphasised to April that while school might discuss physical protection, there's no protection for the soul apart from navigating this God's way. I used biological terms like "genitals" in our conversations, aiming to remove the mystery and secrecy around human sexuality and approach it from a biological perspective.

Looking back, I realise that if my soul had been healed earlier, I would have minimised the scars and avoided wrong relationships. The bad boys I attracted never lasted long, and I often wondered why my relationships didn't translate into long-term commitments. Now, I understand they were the wrong match for my current capacity. Had I been married earlier; I wouldn't have gained the experiences that shape what I advocate for today.

Interestingly, while finalising my public speaking profile recently, I decided my signature keynote talk would be titled "MAD: Motherhood, Advocacy, and Development." This encapsulates my journey and what I stand for, and it was met with enthusiastic approval.

If I had lived a normal life, I wouldn't have gained the unique perspectives and resilience I have now. I've always been the outlier, thinking differently from others. This has allowed me to be a supportive presence for my family, even financially, which I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. My conviction is that in marriage, the woman submits completely to her husband, embracing the role of a helper. So, the day I get married, I'll be Dr Robynn, with an apron on and a tray, submitting to the vision of my head chef.



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The darkside *A father wound*

Understanding the darker side of life involves recognising the shadow aspects of society that shape us for better or worse. My “father wound” significantly impacted my approach to relationships. The lack of trust in men is a major theme for me. Before I trust a man, I trust a woman because the matriarchs in my life have always shown up for me. This lack of trust affected my previous relationship, as my ex could sense that I didn’t trust him fully. I maintained a level of emotional independence, collaborating without fully engaging my heart and soul.

This emotional self-protection stemmed from my experiences as an only child, often feeling different and alone. I’ve always maintained a safe emotional distance to protect myself from being completely hurt. As I consider marriage, I recognise the need to address these trust issues. However, true healing might only come through the intimate relationship of marriage, which can expose and refine our deepest flaws. So, while I strive to heal, I also understand that some parts of me will only be sharpened in the context of a marriage.

An unhealed soul perpetually attracts the wrong fit in relationships. My lack of awareness about the condition of my soul led me to repeat the same mistakes and enter cycles of unsuitable relationships over time. As an eight-year-old, I didn’t have the agency or capability to peel back the layers of these issues. An eight-year-old shouldn’t carry the responsibility of making such decisions, like avoiding bad influences or understanding the complexity of relationships.

The 43-year-old me comprehends this with conviction, but I need to package this premise in a way that a child can understand, preventing them from accumulating emotional and spiritual scars.



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A
**MESSAGE
TO A
SEVEN-
YEAR-OLD**

Your parents and other adults may sometimes fall short and disappoint you; after all, they are only human and may not always be able to meet all your needs. However, there is one who is all-knowing – the Creator of all, who has crafted you uniquely, as seen in your distinct fingerprint. Follow Him!

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12