

Torchbearer of the past and future

Storyteller, poet, playwright, actor, director, author and activist Dr Gcina Mhlophe stands out as a torchbearer of South Africa and Africa's oral and storytelling tradition. This week she received an honorary doctorate from Nelson Mandela University. **Heather Dugmore reports**

EVERYONE has a story to tell, and Dr Gcina Mhlophe wants to hear it. Her calling is to bring out the storyteller in each one of us, to talk about who we are and where we come from in a contemporary evocation of Africa's ancient oral storytelling tradition.

For Mhlophe the stories of the living and those who have passed, whether recently or thousands of years ago, are all part of the great circle of knowledge that needs to be honoured. And so she came up with the Durban-based Gcina Mhlophe Memory House, South Africa's first public home of storytelling and oral history museum.

"It will be a space where people from all walks of life can listen to the stories and histories of ordinary people, record their own stories, and view heritage films and documentaries in an inspiring environment that is home to all," explains Mhlophe who was born in Hammarsdale, KwaZulu-Natal, and who has been writing for children and adults, and performing on the stage and screen for more than 30 years.

The Memory House is currently in development, with funds being raised for a building, but in the meantime Mhlophe is

getting it going from her home on the Bluff in Durban.

"I am compelled to do this," she says. "My people named me Gcinamasiko, which means the keeper of heritage. I wear this name like a blanket and I honour it with my being."

Words and thoughts, she explains, whether spoken, written, performed, painted or made into bead work, are magical things that create who we are.

She learnt this through her paternal great grandmother, Nozincwadi MaMchunu, whom her father told her collected, literally, "a suitcase full of words".

"She is said to have collected anything with words – books, articles, old Bibles, newspapers – and she kept them all in a suitcase. She told my father that these words were magical things that would speak to her one day."

Dr Mhlophe never saw inside that suitcase, which was lost in time, but the power of the message spoke so strongly to her that she launched a literacy campaign in 2001 and has continued with it ever since. Literacy is as much about reading and writing as it is about self-concept, imagination, originality and using your voice. And in this country we've got voices, baby!"

She says the late MaMchunu is delivered from the grave through the literacy campaign, and since 2001 Mhlophe has travelled throughout South Africa, visiting schools, doing performances, donating books and encouraging young South Africans to read. "We do extreme make-overs at the schools, painting and fixing up a room that is not being used and turning it into a library and reading room. We've been all over, and my goodness, we have a beautiful country!" says Dr Mhlophe, who celebrates all languages and cultures.

"When we celebrate International Mother Language Day on February 21 each year, we celebrate all the languages in our country,



Dr Gcina Mhlophe conceived of and hosts the annual Spirit of Light Festival to honour people from all walks of life and how they are shining a light in their communities.

continent and world, including sign language and braille. When we celebrate International Women's Day on March 8 each year, we celebrate all women, and all people who are doing amazing things."

Dr Mhlophe also conceived and hosts the annual Spirit of Light event to honour people from all walks of life and how they are shining a light in their community. "This year the Spirit of Light Festival is taking place in Durban on September 6-8 and storytellers from all over – from Jamaica, Reunion, Zimbabwe, Botswana, West Africa – will be attending, alongside our South African storytellers. The theme is the *Bones of Memory* and we are going to be sharing a lot of history telling."

Mhlophe says there are so many bright lights in our country "but we don't hear about them because they don't steal or commit atrocities and therefore they don't make the front pages of our newspapers. Hence, we honour them at this festival and we also honour all 'women in the making', which was my daughter Nomakhwezi's idea."

Twenty-one-year-old Nomakhwezi recently graduated from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in drama and marketing and is currently pursuing her honours there. Her father is Dr Mhlophe's husband, artist Karl Becker, whom she met while she was on tour in Germany in 1988.

One of Dr Mhlophe's favourite bright lights is Mama Cwengi Myeni from the Valley of a Thousand Hills who founded the Gogo Olym-

pics for people over 60 who want to keep fit and compete in their Olympics. This has led to international events, including South Africa playing Canada in Hillcrest, KwaZulu-Natal.

Mhlophe says: "Mama Myeni is in her 70s and she is so alive, not to mention her gorgeous skin, which she keeps that way with tried and tested Vaseline Blue Seal!"

Spend time with Dr Mhlophe and you will be smiling in no time; she has a brightness and ebullience that shines a light on you. Her charm has evolved from wonderful times and very difficult times.

"Like all of us, I've had my fair share of crying and hardship, including being fetched out of the blue at age 10 by my mother whom I never knew until then and being sent to boarding school in the Eastern Cape. Displaced from everything that was familiar to me, I was treated like a foreigner in the Xhosa-speaking Eastern Cape.

"But, as I tell people, when the river is flooding and you are being sucked by the current, and a branch comes along, you hold onto that branch for dear life.

"For me books were the branch and I held onto them for dear life."

In time, she learnt to know and appreciate her mother who also instilled in her the invaluable habit of hard work. "She couldn't tolerate it when people dragged their feet."

Mhlophe also mastered sufficient courage to ask her mother why she had abandoned her as a baby. "In those days it was taboo to ask these questions. I learnt that she had run away from a very difficult marriage in the Eastern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal where she had met my father and given birth to me. I realised that sometimes, no matter how hard it is, you have to return and sort out what you left behind, which she did. When her abusive husband passed away, she came to fetch me.

"With hindsight I can appreciate that the hard times I have experienced made me stronger and gave me a sense of self-love and self-reliance. Where I was so lucky is that as a young child I received a strong foundation of love from my father's oldest sister, Gogo Mthwalo Mhlophe, who raised me until I was 10. It's the all-important foundation – like when you are going to build a high-rise building.

"She gave me all the love and adventure a little girl could desire."



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A pioneer in SA medicine

HEATHER DUGMORE

PROFESSOR Marina Xaba-Mokoena, a pulmonologist and pioneering health sciences academic, committed her career to helping people in the rural Eastern Cape. Nelson Mandela University awarded her an honorary doctorate at its graduation ceremony on Wednesday.

"As a black person it was extremely difficult to become a doctor in South Africa a century ago when Nelson Mandela was born as there were no facilities to study here. This meant finding a way to study abroad," says Xaba-Mokoena, who turns 80 this year.

She speaks with personal knowledge as her father, Dr Rotoli Xaba, who qualified in the medical profession in 1936, was the 23rd "non-white" to become a doctor in South Africa – each one of them qualifying abroad. "He was from Willowvale in the Eastern Cape, where I was born and he managed to get his medical degree in Scotland through a bursary from the United Transkeian Territories General Council known as the 'Bunga'."

Xaba-Mokoena followed in his footsteps. Graduating as a doctor in 1973 at the Stockholm University in Sweden, she went on to specialise in lung disease, becoming a pulmonologist. She, too, achieved this on bursaries, initially training to be a nurse. After passing her final exams in nursing with honours, she received the SA Nursing Council gold medal for achieving the highest marks in the country.

This led to her being funded by the Bantu Welfare Trust of the Institute of Race Relations to receive orthopaedic nursing training in London, where she obtained the highest marks in the whole of England and Wales. Following this, she received a scholarship to study medicine in Sweden and after six months of intensive training in the Swedish language, she began her medical studies.

"It wasn't easy but we had to find a way as it was not unusual for people in our community to have these aspirations.

"There were a lot of educated, politically conscious people in Willowvale, which had good primary and secondary schools, with excellent, politically conscious teachers and principals who produced top results.

"Many of us completed our schooling at Methodist boarding schools, of which there were several in Transkei, including Healdtown near Fort Beaufort, which I attended for five years and completed my matric there. Mandela also completed his matric there, as did a number of other South African leaders, including Robert Sobukwe, Govan Mbeki, the Emeritus Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane and the Reverend Seth Mokitimi, who became the first black president of the

Methodist Church of southern Africa.

"The Methodist or missionary schools did a lot of good work as far as education is concerned, and though they are rightly criticised for their role in colonialism, we received a quality education, which many did not. Regrettably, these schools were destroyed by the entry of Bantu education when many of the teachers and principals were expelled and several went into exile."

In her matric year, Xaba-Mokoena's father died. He never saw his wish fulfilled of seeing one of his children taking after him and working as a doctor in rural Transkei. Financially, his death

put a strain on the family and Xaba-Mokoena's maths teacher, a Miss Blunsom, paid for her fees so she could finish the first year of her BSc at Fort Hare.

Headtown matriculants typically studied at what was then called Fort Hare University College. Mandela met Oliver Tambo there.

Hard work and determination catapulted Xaba-Mokoena to the top of her classes.

"I wanted to prove to myself and everyone else that you can succeed at whatever you really want to do and I was fortunate to have a great motivator in my mother, Mildred Xaba (nee Mvambo). She was a primary school teacher and a leader in the church, the Girl Guides and the Women's Zenzele ("Do It Yourself") Association, with its motto, Lift as You Rise.

Xaba-Mokoena was determined to specialise in lung disease and open the first faculty of medicine and health sciences at the then-University of Transkei, now Walter Sisulu University.

Her specific interest in lung disease started when her husband, economist PE Mokoena, developed asthma. This led her to into the world of lung diseases, including asthma, asbestosis, pneumonia and TB, a major cause of death in South Africa compounded by HIV.

"I knew I could help people with these diseases and in 1980 I started working as a pulmonologist at the Mthatha general hospital," said Xaba-Mokoena.

She was appointed as the hospital's principal specialist in 1982 and in 1983 the International Union against Tuberculosis appointed her as a member of the Scientific Committee on Respiratory Diseases.

"I formed the Transkei National TB Association, the local counterpart of the SA National Tuberculosis Association. We organised international conferences and made sure that the most effective TB drugs were made available to treat (patients) in Transkei.

"I saw an encouraging decline in TB until the scourge of HIV hit... on the positive side, many diseases are preventable at relatively low cost, and people must be educated about this. Many diseases are also treatable.

"TB, if caught early, can be cured. Thus, when we founded the faculty of medicine and health sciences at the University of Transkei in 1985, we chose to focus on primary health care and disease prevention rather than predominantly on curative medicine," said Xaba-Mokoena who remained with the university until 1994.

Her subsequent posts included serving as the medical superintendent, specialist chest physician and chief physician at the Duncan Village Day Hospital in East London and as chief phys-



Professor Marina Xaba-Mokoena is delighted to have received an honorary doctorate from a university named after Nelson Mandela.

ician and consulting principal specialist at the East London hospital complex where she worked until 2013 when she retired at the age of 75.

"Throughout my career I have emphasised the need to promote disease prevention and health promotion in all our communities and I am delighted that the executive dean of the health sciences faculty at Nelson Mandela, paediatric cardiologist Professor Lungile Pepeta, is doing this."

"This approach is spot on. So many diseases are non-communicable... such as high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes. We need to educate people about how to avoid or manage them and how to keep their immune system strong, which makes them more resistant to infection and helps them to live a longer, healthier life.

"My parents died in their fifties and most of my seven siblings died before the age of 50 as high blood pressure and diabetes is very prevalent in my family. When I turned 38 I developed very high blood pressure and so when I made it to 50 I had a big celebration, and here I am at 80."

Still highly active, Xaba-Mokoena is national president of the SA Medical Association. She continues to write articles for the SA Medical Journal, is a lay preacher in the Methodist Church and recently authored her memoirs, *Dream Fulfilled*.

Her secret for longevity is "determination and a healthy lifestyle". She goes to gym and hydrotherapy several times a week, stopped eating sugar years ago and is careful not to eat a lot of fatty or fast foods. "It has made a huge difference to my blood pressure and general health. This doesn't mean I haven't had health issues but I am still going strong.

"It is my greatest joy to be bestowed with this honorary doctorate and see so many health sciences students graduating from this wonderful university named after Nelson Mandela."

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