



A Finger in many pies

Basetsana Kumalo is a veritable superwoman

Robbie Stammers

There are not many people who can claim to have interests in mining, media, property, travel, strategic investments, cosmetics, clothing and philanthropy – but Basetsana Kumalo is juggling all these balls, and makes it seem so simple.

Bassie, as she is affectionately known, is one of four siblings (she has two sisters and a brother), and was born and bred in Soweto, Johannesburg.

By her own description, she was a bit of an introvert at school, whom “nobody wanted in their team”! Hard to believe, considering she became head girl at high school and won the award for Best Science Student.

From an early age, she was a natural entrepreneur, spending weekends with her siblings making and selling sandwiches at local soccer matches to help keep the family afloat.

“Growing up in apartheid, you either got yourself in trouble and got locked up by the system or you were kept busy on other things,” says Bassie. “My mother was exceptional in this regard and made sure we were always busy with all sorts of extracurriculum activities: from the church choir, to youth camps, to selling sandwiches or ice lollies in my neighbourhood streets.

“She was a formidable Xhosa woman and did not suffer fools – her word was law.”

Bassie credits her mother with instilling in her an exceptional work ethic, which certainly seems to have paid off.

“My mother taught us to work with money from a young age. I used to think it was so unfair that I was this young child being forced to sell things and work while my school friends played in the streets, but it taught us that if you want something in life, you have to be prepared to work damn hard to get it,” she says with honesty.

It was her mother, in fact, who entered Bassie into the beauty pageants that really kick-started her career. Her beauty saw her being crowned Miss Soweto and Miss Black South Africa in 1990 at the tender age of 16.

Just four years later, she won the Miss South Africa pageant, and was crowned First Princess in the Miss World Competition. “It was an incredible honour being crowned Miss South Africa, and it certainly put me onto a platform of significant prominence,” Bassie admits.

As Miss SA, she earned the love and respect of the nation, spending much of her time involved in community upliftment projects, particularly in the area of fund-raising.

According to www.women24.com, an issue of *Fairlady* magazine with Bassie on the cover sold more copies than one with Catherine Zeta-Jones as cover celebrity!

It was while she was still Miss South Africa that she began working as a presenter on the popular television programme, *Top Billing*. “It was unheard of at the time that a reigning Miss South Africa could make the leap into television presenting, but I was determined and had this passion for working in media,” says Bassie.

She became even more of a household name when she was chosen to be the face of Revlon’s Realistic Hair Care range for both sub-Saharan Africa and internationally. She remained as Revlon’s spokesperson in this capacity for five years.

In 1995, Bassie became a 50% partner in Tswelopele Productions, the company that produces *Top Billing*. She and her Tswelopele partner Patience Stevens decided to reformat the *Top Billing* show – and the rest, they say, is history.

“If you think about 1995, we were still a very young democracy, so becoming a 50% partner in a production company back



then was still quite unheard of for a young black female,” Bassie acknowledges.

In 1999, Tswelopele merged with Union Alliance Media and was listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, making Bassie one of the youngest black woman directors to be part of the mainstream South African economy.

Her production company has since started producing other reputable TV shows, including the Afrikaans magazine programme *Pasella*, and a youth TV show in siSwati called *Ses’kona*.

As Bassie explains in an interview on the *Top Billing* website: “Being the Tswana word for ‘progress’, Tswelopele demonstrates the principles of growth, development, transparency, ubuntu, the building and empowering of people, including employees.”

She does admit that she had to grow up very, very quickly: “At the age of 20, while most of my friends and cousins were going to dance in clubs and finding their feet, I was travelling with President (Nelson) Mandela around the country to raise funds for a reconstruction development programme, and trying to run a company. There was very little time for play.”

She speaks very fondly about that time with Tata Madiba, and would not change things if she had to do it all over again.

Since then, Bassie has become quite a formidable force in the business world.

Over the years, she has been the recipient of numerous awards for a range of achievements, including an honorary scholarship for overseas study in 1994 from then president Mandela.

In 2000, Bassie launched her own clothing range.

The following year, she joined Travel with Flair as a director, which won the Top Travel Agency award in 2007; and in 2009 at the World Travel Awards, the agency won three awards, namely Africa’s Leading Business Travel Agency, Africa’s Leading Travel Management Company and South Africa’s Leading Travel Management Company.

Besides the eyewear range, Bassie also launched her own brand of cosmetics and added to the range in 2006.

She sits on the boards of five major companies. It does not end there, though: On top of all her current companies and her family, she still somehow finds the time to study. “I am finishing off my degree through Unisa and plan on doing an MBA after that,” says Bassie.

“It can be hard being a mother, a wife, a spokesperson and business owner in all these other roles, but one has to learn to prioritise; and when I need help, I am not scared to ask for it,” she says candidly. “I am not trying to win a trophy for (being) superwoman.”

But clearly “Superwoman” does not seem that unrealistic a title for her.

Bassie and her husband, Romeo, established the Romeo and Basetsana Kumalo Family Foundation, which aids in the development of children, particularly those who have been orphaned by Aids or other related diseases. She has joined the United Nations Children’s Fund spokesperson and actress Salma Hayek in the bid to eradicate neonatal and maternal tetanus – their aim is to raise more than 250 million vaccines by 2012, to help eliminate this silent killer disease.

Besides being nominated in 2007 by former South African first lady Graça Machel to be one of five celebrities who volunteered to take a public HIV test, Bassie has also helped to raise money for the Baragwanath Children’s Hospital.



Bassie is happily married to Romeo Kumalo, a successful businessman in his own right

She is a volunteer for Agang Sechaba, a project started in 2007, with the aim of Bassie and other women professionals to give back to the township communities into which they were born.

“Romeo and I are very proud of the work our foundation has accomplished to date,” says Bassie with pride. “We are currently building an orphanage in Soweto. It is a work in progress, and something that is very close to our hearts.”

A devoted Christian, she has received special awards from Operation Hunger, the Cancer Association of South Africa and the Reconstruction and Development Programme, in which she played a key role. Childline, the Take a Girl Child to Work project and Reach For A Dream are merely some of the other charities in which Bassie has become involved over the years.

In 2008, she was appointed to the board of loveLife, an HIV/Aids preventative organisation focusing on media promotion that targets young adults; the aim being to promote life, and save lives through community revitalisation, leadership and development.

For the past six years, Bassie has been a Life Champion for Life College, an organisation steered toward being a catalyst for psychosocial and economic empowerment in southern Africa, by providing character and leadership education. It offers five programmes for youth, adults and business in South Africa and believes in restoring a drive in each individual – not only to rise above their circumstances, but to ask themselves vital questions about how they choose to create and approach their environments.

Other Life Champions include Richard Branson, Peter Gabriel, Jane Raphaely, Tim Modise, Raymond Ackerman and Annie Lennox, to name a few.

It certainly seems that Bassie’s giving nature in all these wonderful causes has certainly poured further good fortune

upon her in other fields. Who says paying it forward does not really work?

In 2005, she launched Uzalile Investments together with two partners, a women-owned coal mining company that has done a joint listing with Sekoko Resources on the Australian Stock Exchange and the JSE.

In 2008, she became a new shareholder of Tawana, a diamond mining company, through a transaction with her investment company, Pro Direct Investments.

Bassie was recently listed as one of the top personal brands in the *Sunday Times* Top Brands Survey.

She was president of the Businesswomen’s Association of South Africa for three years, but has now stopped that to focus on all her other commitments. “It was wonderful to be involved in something that championed the cause of women across the board; it was really great doing it,” she cheerfully recalls.

It may seem a crazy question to ask someone such as Bassie, when one considers the multitude of things on her plate, but what does she enjoy doing in her ‘downtime’ – if, indeed, there is such a thing?

“Absolutely!” she says enthusiastically with a smile. “My weekends are completely sacred. That is my one golden rule: there are no work commitments over the weekend; it is my time for my family, time to spend with my six-year-old son, Nkosinathi, and my husband.

“I also love to cook, so it revolves around good food, good friends and my family.”

With her finger in so many different pies, I end the interview asking her if she and Romeo may be bringing out a Kumalo recipe book in the near future. “Anything is possible,” Bassie says with a grin. And with her, it certainly seems this could be the case.