

A HELPING HAND FOR THE GRIEVING



A loved one's death can be painful and costly. Businesswoman Masekele Ntene and her burial services company make it easier for the bereaved to pay their respects

BY **NOMZAMO NGCOBO** PICTURES: **TUMELO LEBURU**

IT'S A cold, wet morning when DRUM arrives at JSL Towers in the heart of Tshwane CBD to meet the head of Bataung Funeral Insurance Brokers. It doesn't take long to discover it's anything but a dead business. But it's male-dominated – and it's taken one live wire of a woman to begin changing that.

Enter company founder and managing director Masekele Ntene (42), who ushers us into the elegant offices where she works with just one administrative clerk. The rest of her employees, she tells us, work in her native Lesotho (she moved to South Africa 20 years ago fresh from university).

Masekele founded Bataung Burial Services in Lesotho in 2010 and now employs 21 people in her company over there. Two years later, she founded Bataung Funeral Insurance Brokers in Tshwane to expand a firm that she hopes will be “the pride of young women in the insurance and funeral services industry both in South Africa and Lesotho for generations to come”.

But how do you break into and then thrive in a business traditionally run by men?

For a start, 80 % of the employees in both her companies are female – whether it's at management level, in administration or in the field.

And Masekele is quick to point out the importance of business ethics, too. “It's crucial to always act with integrity, honesty and openness. This builds a long-term and mutually beneficial relationship with clients and eventually contributes to growth,” she says matter of factly.

“Success depends largely on having the right people in place. It's crucial to surround oneself with a dedicated team that shares the company's common goals.”

MAIN PICTURE: Masekele Ntene in the office of her company, Bataung Funeral Insurance Brokers in Tshwane.

ONE of these goals is to provide funeral cover underwritten by NestLife Assurance – a 100 % black-owned and managed life assurance company established in 1988 – which supplies coffins, flowers, hearses and family cars, programmes,



ABOVE from LEFT to RIGHT: Masekele spends most of her time on the road looking for new opportunities; the team with Masekele at a client's funeral. LEFT: Masekele addresses an audience at an awards ceremony. RIGHT: Bataung staff members erect a tombstone.



...nts, tables and chairs, catering services, tombstone and plaque design, statues and busts. "While we provide funeral and tombstone insurance to individuals, our primary focus is on group schemes targeting employer organisations, associations, burial societies and church groups," says Masekele. Her company has also joined forces with Bataung Memorial Tombstones, a tombstone, plaque, statue and monument manufacturing company based in Ekurhuleni, east of Johannesburg, which allows them to assist policyholders with the provision of a memorial tombstone for the deceased. "This has traditionally been a cash-upfront expense, but we now provide clients with the opportunity to pay for a tombstone on a monthly basis in exactly the same way that they pay for a funeral policy," Masekele says.

"Other value-added benefits include insurance for transportation of the deceased to their nearest place of burial, as well as airtime and electricity benefits. All these are expenses unfortunately often overlooked when taking out a traditional funeral policy."

COMMUTING between two companies, one in South Africa and one in Lesotho, must take a lot of energy for this high-powered businesswoman.

"I spend two weeks in Lesotho and two weeks in South Africa each month to ensure I'm hands-on in both businesses.

"Fortunately, my life partner is in the same industry, which makes things much easier because he understands how this kind of business works," she says.

She went into the funeral business when she saw a gap in the market for a company "that would be a one-stop shop and also provide an opportunity to sell more top-up in insurance cover to existing clients".

Having worked as Head of Corporate Affairs at NestLife Assurance Corporation for 11 years, she had the ideal background.

"It taught me to be multi-disciplinary in the early stages of establishing Bataung," she says. "It's important to keep your eye on the ball and focus on the short-term as well as

long-term goals of the company.

"One has to be agile and flexible to adapt to customer requirements and gaps in the market, as long as that adaptation falls within the parameters of legislation."

She also warns that start-up companies often overlook the importance of investing in systems at their own peril.

"Make sure there are controls in place as this will save you in the long run and ensure the company is run efficiently."

Her typical day at work usually includes meeting with potential clients, especially for group schemes, to grow the business "because it's key to plan ahead and identify strategies for further growth opportunities".

But this bright, enterprising woman is doing a lot more than ensuring the growth of her company and employees. She's also taking on an industry that's more commonly associated with men and proving that in a business where customers demand high levels of integrity and reliability, she's got everything it takes to provide the best. ■

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“Success is having the right people”