

38. Zanele Buthelezi

Growing up, radio and newspapers were the main source of information in my household. Listening to news bulletins and reading articles helped educate and sensitise me about the socio-economic situation in South Africa. This also reinforced my interest in storytelling and influenced my decision to pursue journalism studies at Technikon Natal.

For many people from poor communities, education is an opportunity to achieve a better life. I was born to working class parents, but this didn't deter my mother from wanting the best education for her children. Most people in my community in Durban's outer west area did not go beyond high school. I was one of the few fortunate people to be able to do so. In 1995, my mother moved me from my township school to a well-resourced former model C school. The experience helped open my mind to new possibilities about a career in the media industry. After matriculating with good grades in 2001, I was very clear about what I wanted to do, and that was to be a journalist. I got accepted at the technikon to study journalism, and that marked the beginning of my journey to an exciting career. The institution had one of the best journalism schools in the country. At that time, it had already produced some of the country's greatest journalists. My cousin Fred Khumalo, a renowned journalist and author, was one of them. In April 2002, Technikon Natal merged with ML Sultan Technikon to form the Durban Institute of Technology. It later became the Durban University of Technology (DUT).

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The journalism department was housed at City Campus in the hustle and bustle of Durban's central business district. This was a perfect location for inquisitive trainee journalists to practise their craft. Some of the city's biggest taxi ranks, the markets and the Berea train station were always full of stories. The institution also had various platforms which afforded students the opportunity to gain experience. Among them was the campus online publication DUTOnline. One of my first stories for the publication was on a money heist I witnessed on the way to campus. I had just got off the train at Berea Station

when gunshots rang out from the upper level of the complex sending early morning commuters screaming and running for cover. A security guard was gunned down in one of the shops. A couple of armed suspects hurried away with money boxes and drove off in their expensive getaway cars (which were likely stolen for the sole purpose of committing the crime). Writing for DUTOnline gave us invaluable experience as new media was starting to boom.

While I believed that obtaining a journalism qualification was important, hands-on experience was also necessary to establish yourself as a journalist. At DUT, we had space to do both, which helped prepare us for the workplace. So, when I was not in class or reporting for DUTOnline, I volunteered at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) among others, to gain experience and build my CV. As a second-year student, I was also a media volunteer during the 2003 ICC Cricket World Cup.

City Campus was away from the main Steve Biko Campus which meant our classes were not often disrupted by student protests that took place every year. We did, however, in 2003 stage our own protest in the journalism department to demand better resources. We walked from City Campus to Steve Biko Campus, and demonstrated peacefully outside the faculty office chanting “journalists united will never be defeated” before handing over a list of demands. This was an important experience in taking a stand, pulling together and holding power to account.

DUT prepared me to enter the workplace with confidence after graduation. The journalism school sharpened my writing and reporting skills. My National Diploma: Journalism and Bachelor of Technology: Journalism prepared me for all aspects of the profession. The lecturers who had vast experience in the industry gave the necessary support to ensure we thrived. After a year of relentless volunteering, SABC hired me as an intern before taking me on as a full-time employee. It initially took me on as a general reporter. But I quickly focused on politics, which was a major beat for a student journalist at the time. This was during a time leading to the 2004 general elections, and KwaZulu-Natal was one of the highly contested provinces between rivals, the African National Congress and Inkatha Freedom Party. The province had plenty of political hotspots, so I learnt a lot about working in such tense environments. The Schabir Shaik trial was another major case that I covered. The case involved the country's controversial 1999 arms deal and implicated high-ranking politicians including former President Jacob Zuma. Being young and ambitious, I gladly took on the challenge. The experience allowed me to grow in the industry, and prove myself. Initially, reporting live from the field on various SABC radio stations was nerve-racking. There were mistakes at times, but this was my first experience at working under pressure. But I quickly found my feet.

After completing my degree in 2005, I was promoted

to senior political reporter. The SABC had a great group of individuals in radio news, and I learnt a great deal about teamwork. I covered provincial, national and international news events, and interviewed various newsmakers in my career at the SABC. Major news events such as the United Nations Climate conference, elections in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and the 2010 FIFA World Cup helped build invaluable connections and experience.



Zanele Buthelezi with the Gift of the Givers team in Libya

The South African humanitarian group Gift of the Givers invited a group of journalists on their mission to Libya during the uprising in March 2011, and I was fortunate to be a participant. On our travels, we had a lay-over in Cairo, Egypt, in the wake of its revolution that toppled President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. The situation was still tense, especially in Tahrir Square, where protesters had gathered. We travelled by bus from Cairo to Libya's coastal city of Benghazi where the uprising to remove leader Muammar Gaddafi began. We observed rebel groups battle with government forces, and doctors treat the injured

coming from the frontlines. Reporting on the uprising was a dangerous mission. We had to be on high alert on when the frontline was advancing so that we could retreat to safer areas. In one instance, a hotel we had stayed in was shelled hours after we had left. Assignments like these required courage and bravery.

Recognition of my work ranks very high and instils a strong sense of pride. Some of my work won several awards, including three Vodacom Journalist of the Year awards, an SABC News Award, a Gender and Media Award and recognition from my community. I was also part of the HIV/AIDS and the Media Fellowship in 2006 at Wits University's journalism school. Furthering education is key to ensure that skills are up to date and in keeping with developments in the industry. I was among a group of journalists invited by the South African National Editors' Forum to take part in a media management course for women. The course was an introduction to management aimed at increasing the representation of women in senior leadership in newsrooms.

The desire to practise journalism at an international level led me to a job in China where I am expanding my skills at China Radio International which is part of the China Media Group. When not editing stories or doing radio reporting, I am travelling in and outside China. China has a different environment and media culture from a country like South Africa. It's been a fascinating and enlightening experience to work in that part of the world.

To succeed in this profession, you have to work hard, be ambitious and willing to take on challenges. Nothing happens overnight. My degree combined with these qualities have guided me and many others towards their goals in the profession.

Zanele Buthelezi commenced volunteering at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) while still an undergraduate student. She was eventually employed by the SABC. Zanele has won several awards for her work. Following nearly 15 years with the SABC in Durban, she had a brief stint at a communications company in Johannesburg before venturing abroad. After a year and a half as an English teacher in Shanghai, Zanele went back to her first calling, joining China Radio International in Beijing as a news copy editor in 2018.

