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# profile

# Verve

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 4 2009 The Star

## FRANCHISES TO AWARDS IN RAG TRADE



Since winning last year's Elle New Talent Award, which goes to a young, promising fashion design student at the Sanlam SA Fashion Week, Anisa Mpungwe has been going places, writes Jabulile Ngwenya

**A**NISA MPUNGWE, designer of the Loin Cloth & Ashes label, says she was expected to be the recipient of the 2008 Elle New Talent Award. Nor did she expect to get to where she is today.

Flashing a smile, the Tanzanian-born Mpungwe says: "All I knew was I was a hard worker, and that the fashion industry was meant for me. And to get there, I had to sweat the good stuff."

Scissors in hand, pencil tucked behind her ear and a tape measure draped around her neck, Mpungwe smiles. "One should never underestimate the power of hard work," she says.

With a BA in fashion design and marketing from the Midrand Graduate Institute, and a post-graduate diploma in creative pattern construction from The London International School of Fashion, she admits that the first pattern she made at 18 was "horrid".

"I didn't know what I was doing and it took me a while to figure it out," she laughs, adding that if she hadn't gone into fashion she would have become a politician, following in the footsteps of her diplomat parents.

Since receiving the award, she describes her life as "a whirlwind of

excitement, pressure and a lot of crash course lessons".

Through a Mr Price mentorship, she has learnt that "every penny counts" and to be wise about the products put forward. She says she has also learnt to reach out and get to know clients.

"Fashion is not only about proving you can design interesting garments. It includes acquiring a business mindset," says Mpungwe. But it is being the first-born of three children that really motivates her.

Mpungwe, who moved to South Africa at the age of 16, recalls an important lesson her mother imparted to her.

"My mother told me once while driving me back home from a university interview: Anisa, this is what you have chosen to do; there is no reason whatsoever to fail. You're the first born and you have to show them an example to your siblings."

"I have kept that with me ever since. Failure has no home here," says the 25-year-old. But she reveals that being the eldest can be a lonely road.

"There are times when I feel weak and vulnerable, and want to cry, but I still have to put on a brave face."

Self-motivation has played a role



Anisa Mpungwe, a young designer who owns the ethical label Loin Cloth & Ashes.

PICTURE: NEL BAYNES

in her success, driving her to learn the ropes as a student.

"At the end of my first year in university I felt like I was moving along at a snail's pace with everyone else, so I asked my lecturer if she knew of any extra jobs I could do on the side. I've been working ever since."

Mpungwe has added fashion intern at Glamour magazine and overseeing production at several factories to her CV.

"I really wanted to do it all so that I could see where I fitted in.

"The fashion industry is

huge, and it was fair to give myself a chance where I could," she says. She has worked with Craig Jacobs - she was Fashion Week 2008 for his label Funduzi - and her own label last designer for Bia

"Loin Cloth" - the term sacks and a Hebrew custom of wearing heavy warfare before sacks, and dresses," says Mpungwe.

While she and her siblings have Arabic names, they are Catholic. Anisa, she says, means "friendly" in Arabic, and "grace and/or favour" in Hebrew.

She talks about her religious upbringing, which has in some way influenced her fashion view. Her father is Muslim and her mother is Catholic.

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Growing up in Tanzania, she attended an Anglican school, St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, where she discovered she had an aptitude for designing clothes.

As she talks, she works on her

patterns. Soft muscle plays in the background.

This is her world, yet she ponders the socio-economic inequalities in her homeland.

"I would like to go back to Tanzania one day and do something that means more than just making pretty clothes," she says.

"Fashion is a business, and it can be used to feed families."

She takes a break to show a couple of her creations. She has designed a ribboned gown for a university ball and a white strapless, debaute ball gown.

Her thoughts constantly focus on design ideas. "I'm never not doing something. My mind is always busy, and I don't watch TV."

"I'm always thinking about what to do next, and reading up about fashion trends."

Her signature design style, she says, is "spunky".

"I'm exactly like that: spunky, and I would like to dress women who feel the same way."

The Japanese art of origami, she says, also features in her designs. Regularly experimenting with fabrics and patterns, Mpungwe discovered origami thanks to a John Galliano jacket, and an Alexander McQueen one-shoulder dress, both of which she deconstructed.

"Sometimes if I don't understand something I have seen, I make an exact replica of it so that I can understand its logic," she says.

She mentions that the elegant swimmer pieces she put out at the September Sanlam SA Fashion Week Autumn/Winter 2009 Collections were an experiment.

"My close friends had been pestering me to do their bikinis for summer, so I thought a small introduction to this would be fun and interesting to pursue."

Describing herself, Mpungwe admits that she is shy if she doesn't know someone and, to hide this, she tends to joke.

When she's angry, she speaks in Swahili, her mother tongue. Time for herself, she says, somehow hardly features in her life anymore.

But she makes a point of finding time to collect CDs and DVDs. "I love Julie London, Naté Cole, Natalie Cole and hip hop," she says.

Mpungwe reveals, with a sigh, that she wishes that she could get more sleep.

Right now, though, she's too busy carving a name out for herself in the fashion industry. She hopes to successfully combine being a businesswoman and a designer.

"It's something I'm working hard at to get right."

● Loin Cloth & Ashes can be viewed at [www.loinclothandashes.com](http://www.loinclothandashes.com), and the studio shop is open from Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm and on appointment after hours.

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