

● **Ex-municipal official opened ‘ghost’ accounts**

Schumacher gets five years for fleecing poor

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She stole more than R439,000 from the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality – money which was meant to be used for the poorest of the poor – and therefore direct imprisonment was the only punishment for former municipal public health official Pumeza Schumacher.

Schumacher, 36 – the mastermind behind several “ghost” accounts through which she enriched herself over four years – was sentenced by the Port Elizabeth Commercial Crimes Court to five years in prison on Thursday.

Magistrate Lionel Lindoor told the convicted fraudster that although she was a first-time offender, she “should be removed from society, at least for a period of time”, eliciting gasps from the public gallery, where several of her family members were seated.

Schumacher was employed as a public liaison officer at the municipality until November 17 2017, when she resigned with immediate effect.

For four years, she opened several accounts for non-existent people, creating a number of “ghost” employees for ward-based cleaners as part of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP).

“You have been convicted of a very serious offence involving in excess of R400,000 that you’ve stolen over a period of four years,” Lindoor said.

“So, on average, you have stolen more than R100,000 a

year from your employer.
“It can therefore not be said that you acted on the spur of the moment.”
Lindoor said he had considered various sentencing options for the married mother of two young children.
But because of the calculated and systematic manner of the crime, he had dismissed imposing a fine.

Lindoor also said placing her under correctional supervision or imposing a wholly suspended sentence “would result in an over-emphasis of the accused’s personal circumstances and an under-emphasis on the seriousness of the offence and the interest of society”.

“You stole money that was to be used for the poorest of the poor and I’ve come to the conclusion that the only appropriate sentence is one of direct imprisonment,” the magistrate said.

“Having, however, considered the interest of the children, it is my view that the period that you spend in prison should not be too long so that the time you are removed from your children should be kept to the minimum.

“I am satisfied that should a custodial sentence be imposed, your children would be adequately cared for.”

Talking directly to Schumacher, who was clutching the desk in front of her, Lindoor said: “Your sentence is effectively five years in prison, but depending on your behaviour in prison [and] whether you are going to enrol for the pro-

grammes they offer in prison, you may be released sooner – after you have served approximately 10 months of your sentence.”

Schumacher closed her eyes briefly before then indicating to the magistrate that she understood.

She indicated later that she would not be applying for leave to appeal.

Schumacher’s lawyer, Carolyn Ah Shene, said her client had already paid back all the money she had stolen and was remorseful.

“She was convicted of [stealing] that amount but she has fully repaid that money now.

“We need to place that on record because I know that there have been comments on the internet with people saying she needs to pay it back,” Ah Shene said.

“And I also need to point out further that her family was not aware of what was going on. Her husband as well.

“So obviously it came as a shock to all of them. The fact that she took the step of pleading guilty shows remorse in this matter. She’s sorry for what she did,” Ah Shene said.

Schumacher’s family members sobbed quietly when they hugged her goodbye.



LOW PROFILE:
Pumeza Schumacher in court on November 27
Picture:
SIYAMTANDA
CAPA