



Publication: Saturday Dispatch - Main

Title: EC firefighter braves Canada's underground fires, and a bear

Publish date: 22 Oct 2022

Page: 6

Reach: 14973

AVE: R 154597.69

Author: Yanga Soji



FRONTLINE: The Working on Fire team fights blazes across SA and also assists other countries in times of need. Nomaphelo Mdayi has been deployed to wildfire-prone Canada twice. Pictures: SUPPLIED

EC firefighter braves Canada's underground fires, and a bear

Hogsback-based Mdayi has been nicknamed 'Maqinashé' (the strong one)

YANGA SOJI

Imagine fighting a ferocious underground fire in the wilds of Canada while wondering if you will make it home to see your family, and then coming face-to-face with a bear.

This is not a movie script but one of the risky moments Hogsback-based firefighter Nomaphelo Mdayi has had to face in her fiery but rewarding career.

Similar to the heroic scenes in a movie, this Eastern Cape native never knows what to expect when she steps out with her teammates.

While the petite 29-year-old may not look the part, she certainly lives up her nickname *Maqinashé* (the strong one).

Mdayi joined the Working on Fire team in 2013 after matriculating and coming across an advertisement requesting interested people to apply.

Being a runner at school stood her in good stead during the gruelling training she had to go through before being selected.

"The very first session eliminates a lot of people because it is quite intense physically," she said.

"I managed to make it to the next phase in Mpumalanga which was even more demanding."

"After I made the cut there, I was deployed to Katberg to join the team there."

"Our job is to respond to wildfires which can become very destructive in a short space of time. I also specialise in first-aid response at the sites now."

The Working on Fire team also assist other countries battling with wildfires, and Mdayi has been deployed to wildfire-prone Canada twice.

At the time of this article, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada was battling its worst wildfires in nearly 50 years.

Before her first overseas assignment in Canada in 2016, she said the team were warned it was a "risky assignment".

"My first thought was will I come back alive?"

"I soon answered myself that 'u thixo ukhona' [God is with me] and will watch over me."

"We live for our children and families and no matter what happens out there on the job, I do my best for them."

In Canada, she discovered wildfires also burnt underground in very sensitive terrain.



AT THE CROSSROADS: Nomaphelo Mdayi found herself becoming another statistic after she completed matric and could not study further because of funding issues. But her life would take a different direction when she applied to join a firefighter programme. Picture: SUPPLIED

"We were given a shovel and another tool on top of carrying heavy fire equipment on our bodies. A full day would end without the fire source being located but we continue working up until we make progress."

Nomaphelo said seeing the extent of the destruction and how devastating fires spread in Canada was eye-opening.

She was called up to return to Canada again in 2019.

Apart from having to be physically and mentally fit for the job, the team also had to contend with the threat of bears in the forests.

A terrifying one-on-one with a bear is an experience Mdayi said she would never forget.

"I was some metres away working to find the fire source."

"Suddenly I looked up and saw a bear come my way."

"When a bear approaches, you must make noise."

"In our assignments there are whistles. Bears are scared away by noise."

"I started singing quite loud up until I started crying but I did not stop. The bear came closer and I sang louder."

Luckily, a Canadian teammate saw the bear and blew his whistle, which helped.

"The bear will walk back and you must also do the same until it disappears."

"It's dangerous to turn your back on it, you must see it at all times."

When she is not tackling bears overseas or putting out veld fires here at home, she and her colleagues do outreach programmes at schools and in communities about how fire safety, especially in the home.

The team do not assist municipal fire departments in attending to fires in buildings but do work together, such as during the Garden Route fires of 2018.

"We are restricted in the fires we respond to but I do wish to join the other side of the fire-fighting world. I come alive on the field," Mdayi said, giving credit to her employer for helping her repeat Grade 12 and enrolling in a tertiary course.

"Working on Fire is an Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) aimed at providing work opportunities to young men and women. It falls under and is funded by the Department of Environmental Affairs. Participants are recruited from marginalised communities and trained in fire awareness and education, fire prevention and fire suppression skills. They are also trained in skills such as first aid, carpentry, cooking, health and safety and communications."