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Author: ASANDA NINI

Road has not been easy for resilient new public works MEC

ASANDA NINI

Being “recalled” via text message while Matatiele municipality mayor in late 2013 was one of the “most painful episodes” of her life and political career, for newly deployed public works and infrastructure MEC Ntombovuyo Nkopane.

However, the provincial ANC’s decision to remove her later turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the former school principal and teacher.

It ushered her into provincial politics, culminating in her joining the provincial legislature a few months later in 2014, and eventually being unveiled as one of the three new faces in premier Oscar Mabuyane’s revamped cabinet this August.

Born in Matatiele’s Fiva location 60 years ago, Nkopane’s political journey has not been easy.

The widowed mother of three was the third of four siblings, some of whom have since died.

She had grown up under difficult circumstances she said during an exclusive interview at her Bhisho office this week, as both her parents were unemployed.

At one point her family had to depend on her father’s disability grant and sometimes from handouts from generous neighbours and close relatives.

Nkopane attended Phakade Junior Primary School and matriculated at Ludidi Senior Secondary in 1979.

Later, she pursued a teaching diploma at a college of education in Maluti, where her political activism was ignited.

“It was when I was at that college that I can say my political activism in earnest started.

“This is where I was introduced to student politics and where my love for politics blossomed.

“Some of my fellow students and lecturers were instrumental in igniting political activism in some of us growing up.

“When I started working as a teacher in 1983, I later joined the Transkei Teacher’s Association in 1984 and that shaped me as an activist at the workplace,” she said.

She was active in the structures which influenced the formation of Neusa, which later changed its name to Sadtu in 1989.

Nkopane led Sadtu in her region before she was also elected into SACP structures in Mount Fletcher.

While a teacher in Fletcherville, she was elected into the ANC Women’s League in the area.



PUSHING FORWARD: Public works and infrastructure MEC Ntombovuyo Nkopane during her one on one interview at her offices. Picture: MICHAEL PINYANA

She was later elected to the ANC regional executive committee in the then Wild Coast region, which at the time encompassed areas in the now OR Tambo, Alfred Nzo and Joe Gqabi regions.

In 1999, her beloved ex-mineworker husband, her pillar of strength, died.

“It was not easy when my husband died, leaving me with three children.

“He was the only person who had loved and cared for me. I never trusted anyone but him.

“I was about 30 years old when he died, but I never even considered to remarry, because I knew no-one else would love me like he did.

“When he died, one of his last words to me was that the ANC would take care of me, and I did not understand what he meant then, but I think I do now,” said Nkopane.

A year later, she took over from her late husband as her ANC branch chair, while in 2000, her name was raised from the floor and she was deployed by the ANC to serve the Umzimvubu municipality.

She then resigned as a school principal and focused on her council work.

Nkopane headed a number of council portfolios before being elected speaker in 2004.

Two years later, she was deployed to the Matatiele municipality as council speaker, before she took over as mayor in 2010, a move that was set to change her life for the better.

“As a mayor I oversaw some projects, and while doing so I picked up that there were irregularities in the awarding of a certain tender in the municipality.

“When I picked that up, I raised concerns, and at the same time ruffled some feathers.

“When recruitment processes were not adequately followed, and people without necessary qualifications were appointed, I also raised concerns, with some of my colleagues in council not happy about such.

“That is how trouble started for me.

“Later, a dossier was written by fellow comrades to the ANC provincial official alleging all sorts of things about me. That was when I was hauled into a DC hearing by the ANC.

“However, when that DC verdict came out, it cleared me of all wrongdoing, while those who had persecuted me were given suspended sentences by the ANC.

“To my surprise, a few days later I got an SMS from the province, asking me to resign as

mayor.

“It was a very painful instruction and decision, but because I had the ANC’s interest at heart, I obliged and penned my resignation,” she said.

She said many stakeholders in the area had been upset that the ANC had removed her as mayor and had planned to protest and render Matatiele ungovernable, “but I stopped them, and said to them, not in my name”.

“I told them it was not about me but the ANC.

“I told them I was going to go back to my branch and work for the ANC towards the 2014 elections, but it was not long before I got a call summoning me to the ANC provincial office in Qonce,” she said.

She was also deployed as the provincial organiser of the ANC Women’s League as she was already serving in its provincial executive committee.

In 2014, Nkopane made the cut to the Bhisho legislature, and was later appointed deputy chair of chairs.

She later replaced Alfred Mtsi as the chair of chairs, while she also chaired and served in almost 10 legislature committees, until she was appointed MEC in August.