

A portrait of REDI TLHABI, a woman with dark hair styled in braids, wearing a bright pink sleeveless top with ruffles and large hoop earrings. She is smiling slightly and has her arms crossed. The background is a plain, light blue-grey color.

“Anyone who has had the opportunity to study has no excuse. If you have been delivered an education at huge sacrifice, you can’t let that go to waste.”

# Redi, steady, go!

## Tlhabi proves that dynamite comes in small packages

**“G**ood morning, good morning, good morning! Hello, everybody. Welcome to the show.” This has become the signature opening of Redi Tlhabi’s show on *Talk Radio 702* and *567 CapeTalk*. In a way, it encapsulates the personality that the 33-year-old broadcaster projects on air: expansive, inclusive, friendly, confident and humorous. Watching her at work, one is struck by the contrast between the petite figure in studio and the big personality that comes across the airwaves.

Tlhabi has no time to decompress as she rushes out of the studio for our interview. She is the first to admit that her life is extremely busy and pressurised.

“I approach life as though there are 48 hours in a day. I believe I can get around to doing everything. I recently spoke to a friend about a new idea and she responded by saying, ‘When will you find the time?’” she relates.

“I run at 5.30 a.m., then I’m at *Talk Radio 702*, then I write a weekly column, review books and then it’s my TV show on DStv. There are diary meetings and I need to prepare for interviews.

“I’ve just returned from Zambia after recording a show for the BBC.

“I complain to my producers that I’m so tired, but these things seem to find me and I feel: Oh well, I’m young. It’s an opportunity, so do it!” adds Tlhabi.

During our interview, she receives 81 messages on her cellphone and is conscious of the fact that up to 500 e-mails await her attention in the office. On top of that, she has

constant requests to give talks, be a Master of Ceremonies at functions, support charities and help out dozens of individuals with problems.

“The platform of my work is so powerful that people believe you can do anything for them. It’s difficult to explain that my job as a journalist does not mean I can personally resolve every-

*Kaya FM 95.9* and from there to the SABC where she gained experience in television, presenting numerous high-level shows. She was asked to cover the G8 summit in Scotland as the African anchor for the United Kingdom’s Channel Four.

In 2005, she joined *Talk Radio 702*, eventually anchoring one of the prime-time slots.

“I approach life as though there are 48 hours in a day”

thing. The boundary between you as a private person and what you do as a job is not always recognised,” Tlhabi notes.

What many may not know about her is that she is pursuing a very successful academic career. She has a BA degree in Communications, an honour’s degree in Social Sciences and English Literature, and a master’s degree in African Literature. “This is an investment in my future,” she says. “I want to register for a PhD, but keep changing my mind about what I want to study. Someone said ‘Wait, it will come to you’, but I can’t sit back and wait.

“I do know that I will find it. I know I’m going to teach one day and I’m also going to write – there is an author somewhere inside me.”

Tlhabi’s rise to prominent positions on radio and television began 13 years ago. Her first job was at *Network Radio News*, then she moved to

When something is close to Tlhabi’s heart, she can morph into an activist. The only time she has cried on air was when talking about her own experiences, following the story about the ordeal of a young woman at the Noord Street taxi rank, who was attacked for wearing a mini skirt.

Tlhabi made headlines leading a protest against the sexual harassment of women, and has run a number of wellness workshops about this subject.

“Abuse breaks a person’s spirit, stunts their potential. We are so complacent about women and child abuse, despite the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act,” she says.

“As a country, we are doing well in terms of the representation of women in parliament, but what are they doing about this problem? Who is speaking to the men doing this, and addressing how the police handle this crime?”

“The system that responds to abuse is managed by men, and I think there is a lack of understanding. The continuing extent of rape and sexual violence frightens me,” Tlhabi adds.

To try and unpack what motivates this diminutive fireball, we go back to her childhood.

“I grew up in Orlando East, Soweto. We were known as the ‘clevers’ – the most sophisticated and streetwise people in the township,” says Tlhabi. “It also had a reputation for crime and shebeens. But I am very proud of my roots, as some interesting people came from there.

“I have an older brother, and we had a very strict upbringing (perhaps too strict!). Our home was warm and affectionate, but it felt like being in the military, as my parents gave us serious rules and responsibilities. There were always consequences for our actions.

“However, my peers envied our security and that we had parents who cared.

“Then my father died when I was nine. He was stabbed during a crime, and the circumstances were very mysterious. When I was older, I tried to investigate what had really happened. However, I realised that I might only be reopening old wounds and I decided, for the sake of my family, to let it go for the time being,” she relates.

“I still grapple with why my father had such a violent death. There has to be meaning to it.

“He was hard-working, jovial and respected. His death was such a contradiction of what he was as a man. I still need to make sense of that.”

Recently, during a show in which Tlhabi was addressing the issue of crime in South Africa, someone sent her an SMS, which she read out.

It asked her, “What the f\*\*\* do you know about crime?” Tlhabi remained composed and admirably refrained from mentioning the loss that had devastated her childhood.

“I remember as a child that I felt powerless and voiceless. I lacked the vocabulary to articulate my emotions, and nobody asked how I was feeling,” she recalls. “I was very close to my dad, and I felt ambushed. Our family never had a conversation about the event. It was only much later that my mom and I sat down and had that conversation.”

Tlhabi first went to St John Berchmans School and then moved to the suburban school of Parktown Convent. It became too expensive, however, and her mother decided to send her children to boarding school in Potchefstroom when Tlhabi was 14 years old.

Even though she strongly resisted leaving home and was convinced she was going to be miserable, she enjoyed her time there. Her coping mechanism was to simply get on with things and make the best of it.

“I did need the predictability, routine and safety of a protected environment at Potchefstroom Girls High. It rebuilt my confidence. I was seen as a leader, sensible and I respected authority,” Tlhabi says.

“It set my mother’s mind at ease to know we were safe. Life had been rough on her after being widowed at the age of 35, and I wanted her to be proud of me. I was ambitious and always wanted great things.”

Perhaps some of her fears explain what drives her.

“I never want to be poor. I work hard to ensure my financial security. There are many people who have not been born into an enabling environment and have missed out on their dreams,” Tlhabi notes.

“Anyone who has had the opportunity to study has no excuse. If you have been delivered an education at huge sacrifice, you can’t let that go to waste.”

She has been showered with awards, among them the Vodacom Women in the Media “Rising Star Award” and the Most Influential Women “Tomorrow’s Leader” award. She has been listed, six years in a row, as one of the *Mail & Guardian’s* “Young South Africans You Must Take To Lunch”.

But Tlhabi is ambivalent about these accolades: “I am taken aback by how other people regard me. I’ve always wanted to be a journalist, not a celebrity. Why are people great just because they are on radio or TV?

“I am very uncomfortable with the celebrity tag. I only feel I deserve an award if I have earned it. Give me time to achieve real excellence.

“We in the public eye have an unfair advantage. There are many amazing people out there who are equally deserving of recognition, but are unknown. I don’t have a problem with people looking up to me, but they often admire you for the wrong reasons – the superficiality of celebrity, and not true achievement,” she explains.

Besides her work, Tlhabi is an avid reader and runner. She has conquered the mighty Comrades and Two Oceans marathons several times. She recently married Brian Tlhabi, a doctor, who has two grown children.

One wonders if the reason she takes on so much is because, like many women, it is difficult to say no.

“I lie when I say I can say no. But there is one area I am cutting back on, and that is being an MC. I hate it and I don’t want to spend time doing things I hate. I do four charity events a year, and that’s it. But then I feel guilty and consent to do something else. Some of it I choose and some of it comes with the job. So there is always a certain amount of unresolved chaos in my life,” Tlhabi says.

She feels that marriage has changed her priorities, and spending time with family is very important. “However, I find it shocking that people will accept work as an ‘excuse’, but not if you are taking time out for family. I don’t want to be part of the rat race where relationships that matter must wait. There is a balance in life that we are not striking.

“Celebrity and leadership are not necessarily contradictory; look at Oprah Winfrey,” says Tlhabi. “But the leaders I admire are people like Miranda Jordan Friedman of Women and Men Against Child Abuse; Mark Heywood of SECTION27, a law centre that protects and promotes human rights; and Vusi Pikoli, the former national prosecutor. I admire these people because they are at the forefront of the fight against inequality, abuse and political pressure. They soldier on because of an ideal. They are professionals who could be making money elsewhere, but they are out there in the jungle doing what needs to be done. Sure, they may make mistakes, but they do not compromise their truth. I admire a person who is prepared to offend his or her peers in order to make the world a better place.

“I believe (that) in our current political space, there is a growing distance between our leaders and the people they are leading. Many of our leaders are out of touch. They don’t have a finger on the nation’s pulse. They are not ‘hearing’.

“There is a lack of compassion for their people. That’s the missing ingredient,” she notes.

In no time our interview is over, as Tlhabi has to rush one of her stepdaughters to a driver’s testing station before two o’clock.

“What government department closes at two o’clock, for goodness sake!” says an exasperated Tlhabi. No doubt she will tell them so. ▲

*Michele Alexander*

Advert