

## **The Heart of Mhlasini: Bongiwe ‘Mama wesizwe’ Mhlongo’s story of hunger, hope and holding on**

*This Women’s Month, we honour ‘Mama wesizwe’, a woman who proves that even in the most unlikely places, hope can take root and grow.*

Every morning before the sun rises over Verulam’s informal settlements, Bongiwe Mhlongo (39) is already up, preparing breakfast. Not just for her two grandchildren, but also for dozens of little ones who will soon arrive at Sizamakonke Crèche, a beacon of hope she helped build in Mhlasini, KwaZulu-Natal

For many in the community, she is more than a crèche principal. She is a safe space, a provider, and a guiding light. She is ‘Mama wesizwe’ – or in English, ‘Mother of the nation’.

Bongiwe is the founder of Sizamakonke Crèche and Preschool, the Zamasizwe Resource Centre (NPO), and Eyesizwe Youth Unity (NPC) – a youth centre offering mentorship and life skills to local teens.

Heading up a centre backed by Shoprite’s Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme, Bongiwe has created a pillar of opportunity and support for vulnerable families in her community. Her story is driven by a belief that every child deserves a fair chance.

Since early 2024, Shoprite has partnered with Bongiwe, providing nutritious porridge for breakfast at the Sizamakonke Crèche and grocery vouchers for the resource centre. Shoprite also helped train Bongiwe and the ECD practitioners. It’s a partnership that has helped these organisations not only survive, but grow.

This partnership is part of Shoprite’s work with the Lunchbox Fund, through which it supports 138 ECD centres that serve over 9 000 children daily – a critical investment in nutrition and care during the most important years of brain and emotional development. It is a well-known fact that proper nutrition during early childhood doesn’t just feed hungry bellies, it lays the foundation for learning, growth and long-term well-being.

Born into poverty in Inanda and raised in Mhlasini, Bongiwe knows hunger and limited opportunity firsthand. “I’ve always loved learning,” she says. “I knew my future would involve education, even when life gave me every reason to give up.”

After finishing school, she worked odd jobs with little pay and long hours. She grabbed every free learning opportunity, completing more than five skills courses before starting her bachelor’s degree in education. Now in her third year, she says, “I keep learning, for myself and for the children.”

This relentless spirit led her to start Sizamakonke Crèche, meaning “we must try everything”, a philosophy she lives by. “We don’t just teach ABCs. We teach life,” she explains. “Our crèche is a second home for kids and parents alike.”

Beyond the crèche, Bongiwe opened the resource centre in 2019 where children and women are fed. Women at the centre are equipped with entrepreneurial skills, while victims of gender based violence also receive support. The youth centre followed last year.

Her days are anything but easy. "It's a rollercoaster," she laughs. Between meetings, cooking, supervising co-workers, and caring for her grandchildren, there is little rest. But she finds joy in the chaos. "Seeing the difference we make gives me strength."

As a woman from an informal settlement, Bongiwe has often felt underestimated. "We are doubted, overlooked. Our intelligence is questioned. But I've learned to let my work speak for me."

Her dreams remain big: a fully developed school from crèche to Grade 3, a permanent building for the resource centre, and a community free from poverty. Her message is simple: "Women must keep learning. Don't let life's setbacks steal your voice. Picture who you want to be and work every day towards her."

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