

An award-winning movie inspires legal journey of African attorney

By Brian Cox

When Karabo Mponang was a young girl growing up in Gaborone, Botswana in Southern

Africa, she envisioned becoming an acclaimed actress or an accomplished athlete.

“It sounded so much more creative than being stuck in an office,” she says with a bright laugh.

But the picture of her future changed when her older brother suggested she watch the movie “Philadelphia” when she was barely old enough to watch a PG-13 film. The 1993 legal drama stars Denzel Washington as an attorney who represents a gay client, portrayed by Oscar Award winner Tom Hanks, in a wrongful dismissal suit.

Mponang was captivated. She has watched the movie many more times over the years and it ranks just below “The Lion King” as her favorite film.

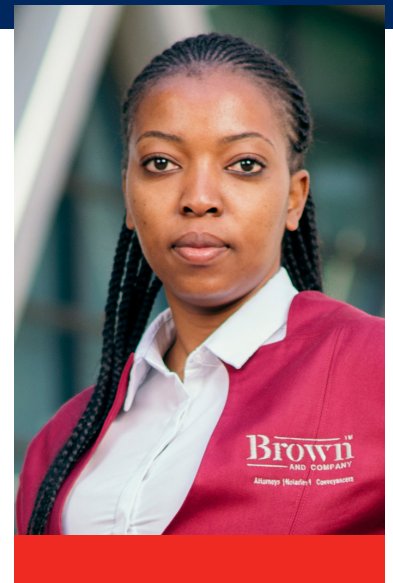
“I watched it and realized maybe this attorney thing isn’t such a bad idea,” she says. “I thought, you know what, instead of going in front of a camera as an actress, I could go before the courts and change a life one matter at a time. I bought into that. I fell in love with the romanticism of the career.”

The movie sparked the desire in her to be a “voice of the people.”

The only lawyers she knew were ones her father consulted for the transport company he ran. Her mother worked for an insurance company. She remembers visiting her mother at work as a child and being awed at seeing attorneys who worked in the same building such as Munyaka Makuyana, who always seemed “so fancily dressed and so poised.” Both her parents supported her early ambition without pressuring her, though they stressed education.

“My parents tried to give me the best kind of exposure they could so I could have the opportunities that I’ve had in my life,” she says.

By the time she entered high school, Mponang had her mind set on being a lawyer. Her destiny was set in 2005 when her older brother, Phenyoy, invited her to his graduation ceremony from



the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Her parents couldn’t make the trip, so Mponang went alone. It was her first time flying. Recounting the excitement she felt on the trip still thrills her.

Her brother gave her a tour of the strikingly beautiful campus, which is on the slopes of the majestic Table Mountain, nestled beneath Devil’s Peak. The ivy-covered buildings and the stunning overlook of the city captured Mponang’s heart.

“When you’re on the campus and you look up you and see Table Mountain — at that time it appeared to have clouds around it and so much greenery — it was so beautiful,” says Mponang.

She looked at her brother and said, “This is it. I belong here.”

But attending the University of Cape Town (UCT) was to be a dream deferred. She was not accepted on her first application. Rather than being crushed by the blow, however, it lit a fire in Mponang.

“There was nowhere else I was going,” she says. “From then on, I was hell-bent on getting my degree and graduating.”

As she waited to reapply to UCT the following year, Mponang pursued another passion: Women’s football. Football was central to Mponang’s life growing up in Gaborone. Her father, Tirafalo, ran a football club for many years. She remembers the team gathering at her home to “camp” on nights before games. Her mother, Sarah, would cook for the players.

“We liked the action,” says Mponang. “We liked having these talented guys at our home.”

In addition to running the club, her father would often tutor players, help them get through school, and then help them find jobs. Mponang says her parents held common goals that included having children, giving them the education and opportunities that they never had, and giving back to others whenever possible.

“They had to each support the other in whatever it was they were doing,” she says of her parents. “We grew up admiring that and, of course, we still have that principle of trying to pay it forward and making a difference in people’s lives with whatever little time, little money, or little effort we can put in at the end of the day to put a smile on somebody’s face.”

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Although she played all manner of sports in primary school and high school – including football, cricket, rugby, tennis, and basketball (“you name it, I can play it,” she says), she never excelled the way she hoped. So, she turned her attention to administrating football.

During the gap year before reapplying to UCT, Mponang started volunteering at the Botswana Football Association, which at the time didn’t have any leagues for women. There was no women’s national team, either. Mponang became involved in resuscitating women’s football in Botswana, setting up a league and commissioning games.

“I learned I was quite patient,” she says of the experience. “I was constantly reminded I was female, young, and sounded like I went to private school. I didn’t know I could be that patient with people.”

Women’s football in Botswana continues to grow. The women’s national team qualified for their maiden Africa Women Cup of Nations (AWCON) tournament just last year.

Accepted at UCT the following year, Mponang earned a Bachelor of Social Science in Politics and Law before going on to get her LL.B. from Kramer Law School in Cape Town. Her college career was not without challenges. In the final semester of her last year of the Bachelor of Social Science, she contracted bronchial pneumonia and was bedridden for weeks. The illness resulted in Mponang staying an additional year to complete a single course in constitutional law.

“That was a difficult year for me,” she says. “It took a toll on me.”

Impatient though she was to get on with her dreams of life as a lawyer, she says she developed a greater appreciation for the South African Constitution that year. She came to see it as more than just content she had to learn to get through school.

“I realized no matter how many documents you might have that enunciate the rights of the people or how many statutes you might have that have been promulgated in your country or how many treaties you might have signed, the fact of the matter is you will have people who will have all these rights infringed,” she says. “And they might not always have access to justice.”

The experience reawakened in her the early desire to be a voice of the people.

“I think that year I realized even more that law wasn’t something I just woke up in the morning and wanted to do – I’m really passionate about it,” she says.

After graduating with her law degree, Mponang returned to Gaborone to practice. As the capital of Botswana and country’s largest city, Gaborone is the headquarters of numerous companies and the Botswana Stock Exchange. It is also home to the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional economic community formed in 1980.

She joined Minchin & Kelly, a well-respected law firm with a history dating back to 1890. Its offices were located in the same central business district as the insurance company where Mponang’s mother once worked.

“It was an amazing environment to be in,” says Mponang. “There was a spirit of camaraderie. The attorneys were willing to teach and the partners were accessible.”

But after not passing the bar on her first go, Mponang faced a difficult choice. She knew she needed more time to fully prepare to take the exam a second time. She requested a period of unpaid leave from the firm but was turned down. She was unsure what to do.

So, she told her dad about the situation, and he called a family meeting.

“We do that often,” says Mponang. “He calls my siblings, calls my mom, and we sit down in the living room and we discuss issues. So, what’s our strategy? We’ve got this bar exam to write. So, what do we do?”

Her father suggested she quit her job in order to commit all her time to studying for the bar. Mponang was stunned by the idea, but with her family firmly behind her, she left Minchin & Kelly. The plan was successful and Mponang passed the bar that year.

After a brief stint at an accounting audit company, Mazars (Botswana), Mponang was approached by a family friend who had once played for her father’s football team and was now a lawyer. He offered her a pupillage at his firm. For two years, she worked at Sebego Attorney before Minchin & Kelly sought her out again. She rejoined the firm in 2019, first working in Civil and Corporate Litigation and then transitioning Compliance Mangement.

The timing, as it turned out, could not have been worse. The COVID-19 pandemic hit almost six months later and Mponang’s contract was not confirmed.

Before she left, a partner told her about a small firm that was looking for a young attorney. He said he’d put in a good word for her.

Bathusi Brown started Brown and Company Attorneys in 2018 after a career with the Directorate of Public Prosecutions. He was looking for an attorney to help him grow a youthful and vibrant firm that was committed to efficiency, professionalism, and tenacity in serving its clients.

After interviewing Mponang, Brown said he faced a tough choice. He had interviewed two other people for the position and they were impressive as well. But Mponang showed him the tenacity he was seeking.

“I said to him, ‘Are you sure they were impressive?’” recounts Mponang. “I don’t think they’re impressive because only one person will be able to do that job and you’re looking at that person. So you can take the next week or so wondering who you

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want to hire, but I can spare you all of that trouble and tell you I'm the one."

Brown agreed. Mponang joined the firm as an associate in 2020. She now heads up the Civil and Corporate Litigation department. Brown and Company's practice areas include corporate and commercial law, employment law, asset forfeiture, conveyancing, estate administration, family law, debt collection, compliance management, and criminal defense.

At the young firm, Mponang was able to wear her administrator hat and put processes in place in the firm. She has a mind map for the firm's future.

"We have hit the ground running," she says. "It's amazing to see where we've come from."

Brown and Company Attorneys prides itself on participating in outreach initiatives such as Orate Africa Championships, a moot competition for high school and now tertiary students, and Effective Learner program through Optimum Performance, a program targeted at improving the learner's ability to learn.

Brown and Company Attorneys is a new Primerus member. Mponang says Brown was looking for an association that aligned with the firm's vision and that promoted firms of its size.

"Primerus seemed to make sense," says Mponang, who recently began attending the weekly Coffee and Conversations. "I'm so stoked. We believe Primerus will help us grow within the parameters of our dreams and even beyond."