

Smooth sailing to open pilot's licence

[Cape Town, South Africa, xx September 2020] The Port of Cape Town's Ellen Moletsane is flourishing in the male-dominated maritime industry after earning her Open Pilot's Licence. Born and raised far from the ocean in Pretoria, Moletsane had limited exposure to the maritime industry in her youth and therefore did not consider pursuing a marine career. However, a Transnet bursary advert in the newspaper that called for black female applicants piqued her interest. "I was 20 and had just done computer studies. I really didn't know much about the maritime industry or what I would be getting myself into, but I saw it as an amazing opportunity and applied," she said.

Moletsane was awarded the bursary and went on to study at the then Cape Technikon. "After the theoretical training I went to do my sea time training with Safmarine for a year. I then completed tug master training and worked as a tug master for five years," she said.

Her next goal was to undertake the piloting programme. "Every year tug masters are nominated for the piloting programme, but I always turned down the opportunity. My friend and I decided to do it and the rest is history," she said. After 12 months of classroom theory and on-the-job training, Moletsane obtained her 15000 GRT license. She continued with the training in order to achieve her Open Pilot License.

As a female in the industry, Moletsane has had her fair share of trials. "It is very challenging to be the only woman on a ship full of men every day, but you find yourself and the person you can be through difficult experiences," she said. "I run my own race. I don't have to be fast; I just have to keep going."

She says the language barrier can be a challenge with foreign crew. "Sometimes you might tell them to do "a" and they start doing "b" and there's a lot of sign language going on. It's very important to get the handover from the captain and all radio communications are recorded so there's back-up. Some captains, though, are very friendly and good communicators."

Highlights, she said, would be the unpredictable nature of the job, and the satisfaction of doing something well.

Her advice to youngsters is "find your passion, set goals and commit to them".

"The most important thing is to find a career that will give you a reason to wake up in the morning, regardless of the industry or job title you choose. Take risks, don't be afraid to say yes. You don't know where you might end up," said Moletsane.

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