

Olivia's Rise from Street Sweeper to Manager

Lebo Moncho reports



Olivia Radebe's brief career reads like a fairy tale.

Recently promoted to Manager: Environmental Projects at Pikitup, Olivia's story is an inspiration to many young people struggling to get their careers off the ground.

Like many other youngsters, Olivia finished high school with great ambitions. She wanted to become a medical doctor, but due to circumstance was unable to register for the degree. Instead she enrolled at Pretoria Technikon where she began a Diploma in Environmental Engineering. By her own admission this was an unusual choice for a girl from Dobsonville, but as she says that is what was available at the time and she was determined to go to tertiary school.

As testament to her commitment to better herself, Olivia also interned in an Experiential Training programme at Sasol.

In 1999 she was forced to drop out of school and the Sasol programme. No one in her family was working and she could no longer afford her

school fees. She went looking for employment.

Again circumstance played a hand. She was told Pikitup was looking for street sweepers at the Selby depot. Selection was a simple process. All applicants put their ID documents in a bucket and those that were drawn out got the job.

Olivia remembers her feelings about getting the job as a night street sweeper. "I was relieved to get a job. But I never thought that I would end up as a street sweeper. In life you set standards for yourself and this is not what I wanted for myself. But my mother said when money comes it doesn't say where it comes from. On the other hand I made good friends with the various people I met on my route which made the experience bearable."

With very clear ideas about where she wanted to end up in life, Olivia was determined to turn her life around – circumstance or no. A year after starting at Pikitup her appointment was upgraded to full time which allowed her to re-register at Pretoria Technikon to complete her Diploma.

"I traveled to Pretoria by train every day," says Olivia. "In the day I went to school and at night I swept the streets of Johannesburg. It was a tough time. I would study and sleep on the train but it was worth it."

As a result of her sacrifices she graduated in 2001. She was also promoted to a position at Pikitup head office as a Community Education Facilitator. In 2002 she completed her B.Tech in Environmental Management and the following year enrolled for her master's degree which she is currently busy with.

OPPORTUNITY AND WILL

When asked what she credits her success to Olivia is quick to respond, "Opportunity and will. You are the captain of your own ship. Your attitude determines your altitude. So grab what is available and make use of it."

She even sees value of having been a street sweeper in her current job. "My job now is very community-based. So being able to talk to anyone and having first hand understanding of what happens at street level is very helpful."

Olivia is also grateful for the assistance that Pikitup has given her along the way. The company helped finance her B.Tech degree. She also values the exposure she received at International Association of Impact Assessors (IAAIA) conferences which she attended through Pikitup.

Her family has also been a source of strength. Her younger brother is her biggest fan. He is always bragging about her and her accomplishments.

With so much under her belt at 27 years old where does she want to end up? "Ke batla ho ba MD!" she says with a laugh. Somehow, one can see it happening. 