

## FROM ENGCOBO TO THE NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT:

# Community support needed for 'Rising Stars' showdown

ZAVELA MAKWABE

LOCAL Afro-jazz singer and songwriter Zintle Mbuyazwe is gearing up for the biggest stage of her career and she's counting on the community to help take her there.

The 35-year-old songbird is competing against a lot of talented fellow singers and bands from across the country to be the opening act at Thandiswa Mazwai's much-anticipated Sankofa Heritage Festival set to take place on Saturday, 28 February 2026, at Carnival City.

The Heritage Festival, which marks Thandiswa Mazwai's 50th birthday and 30 years in the music industry, will feature South African sensation Msaki and Grammy-nominated Ugandan artist Somi as co-headliners and additional guest artists as well.

Born and raised in Engcobo, in a village called Clarkebury, Mbuyazwe began performing around 2012 and later pursued a Bachelor of Music degree at the University of Fort Hare.

In an interview with the Express, she described her sound as Xhosa rhythms woven with jazz influences and centring themes of identity, inclusivity and hope.

"I entered the competition because it would be a profound honour to open for an icon like Sis Thandiswa Mazwai, and because my music and artistic practice strongly align with the festival's vision and themes."

She said that being an opening act for the Sankofa Heritage Festival would provide an opportunity to engage a larger audience while cementing her commitment and contribution as a young cultural practitioner with an authentic and peculiar voice.

"My people can help by following me on my social media pages and reposting the video I used to enter, adding the hashtag Sankofa Heritage Festival and tagging Thandiswa Mazwai's official pages," she said.

The deadline for entries is 31 January 2025 and the winner will be announced on 11 February.



Vote and help take local talent to the national spotlight. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

## Eastern Cape health department brings support to schools



Learners from Mt Fletcher Special School getting direct healthcare from mobile clinics during the Back-to-School Programme. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

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TO ensure a smooth start to this academic year, the Eastern Cape Department of Health MEC, Ntandokazi Capa, recently led a well-being and health initiative at Mt Fletcher Special School as part of the Back-to-School Programme.

The department handed over essential health and dignity support items, including oral hygiene packs, sanitary towels, and school shoes, to promote learner well-being. Mobile clinics and dental services were also deployed to provide direct healthcare access to the learners.

This collaborative effort demonstrates a whole-of-government approach, reinforcing inclusive education and accessible services for learners. The programme's success is evident in its impact on learner dignity, safety, and readiness to learn.

Together with its key stakeholders, the department continued its outreach at ET Thabane Full Service School in the Joe Gqabi District Municipality. The programme focused on strengthening learner

support through coordinated service delivery, with integrated government services brought directly to the school environment.

"It further reinforced collaboration across departments and partners, demonstrating the value of a whole-of-government approach in advancing inclusive education and accessible services for learners at full service schools.

"We are here to offer support as the Department of Health but also to see if the children are healthy, safe, and if their nutrition is adequate and their dignity upheld," MEC Capa said.

She said the issue of malnutrition in the Eastern Cape Province is a serious one and pleaded with parents and the community to ensure that their children eat nutritious food.

"Parents must always remember that the Child Support Grant funds are not for paying for funeral policies and stokvels, but for seeing to the needs of the children, like making sure they are fed healthy and nutritious meals," she said.

## Minister meets traditional leaders on governance

THE Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), Velenkosi Hlabisa, held a follow-up engagement with the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESAs), led by its President, Kgoshi Mokoena. Prince Burns-Ncamashe and the CoGTA leadership team were also in attendance.

Building on the engagement with President Cyril Ramaphosa in December 2025, the meeting marked a strong start to the year and reinforced the partnership between CoGTA and traditional leadership structures.

According to the statement issued by Me-

dia Liaison Officer to the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Pearl Maseko Binqose, in his opening remarks, Hlabisa emphasised the critical role of traditional leadership in community stability, local governance and the ongoing review of the White Paper on Local Government.

He reiterated the Ministry's commitment to strengthening collaboration and ensuring that traditional institutions are effectively integrated into the evolving governance system.

Maseko Binqose said CONTRALESAs wel-

comed Hlabisa's continued commitment and highlighted his longstanding background in traditional affairs. The leadership expressed appreciation for his openness to engagement and reaffirmed the need for sustained cooperation to address long-standing challenges affecting traditional leaders.

"Both Hlabisa and Mokoena expressed deep concern over 49 fatalities recorded during the 2025 summer customary initiation season. They agreed that cultural preservation and the protection of life must remain central priorities. A broad consultative meeting will be convened in February to strengthen

safeguards, enhance oversight, and improve community safety."

Hlabisa reaffirmed that CoGTA remains committed to transparent engagement, meaningful partnership and advancing the shared goals of community well-being, stability and effective cooperative governance.

"This platform is an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and constructive criticism. As a Ministry, we remain committed to listening, learning and working collaboratively to strengthen the traditional leadership institution — the oldest form of governance in our country," said Hlabisa.

## ECPACC, Nelson Mandela Museum's Imbokodo project helps rural women thrive

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IN a collaborative effort to uplift rural women, the Nelson Mandela Museum and the Eastern Cape Provincial Arts & Culture Council (ECPACC) have rolled out the Imbokodo Women Empowerment project.

The programme, which began with a workshop at the Mthatha Craft Hub, aims to equip women from the villages of Qunu, Mqhekezweni and Tyhalarha with sewing and beading skills that will enable them to become registered SMMEs.

The participants learned to design and stitch traditional Xhosa attire such as imibhaco, iincebatha, amabhayi, iinxili and izibheshu,

as well as craft beaded umbhaco sets, headbands and bracelets.

ECPACC supplied the necessary machinery, while the museum provided materials for both sewing and beading.

Speaking to the *Express*, Nontlahla Dalindyebo, senior manager for Public Engagement and Marketing at the Nelson Mandela Museum, said the Imbokodo workshop contributes to the preservation and development of arts and cultural products while upskilling rural women to alleviate poverty.

She added that the programme hopes to empower participants with scarce skills, entrepreneurship training and insight into establishing sustainable cooperatives and ac-

cessing government funding.

The initiative follows an earlier exhibition at the Nelson Mandela Museum's Youth & Heritage Centre in Qunu, where the women showcased their hand-crafted umbhaco pieces.

A selection of these high-quality items is now on sale at the Craft, Visual Arts & Design Pop-Up Shop in BT Ngebs Mall, Mthatha, next to News Café, until 31 January 2026.

For many of the women, the project represents a lifeline.

Thirty-four-year-old Phelokazi Mthonjana from Tyhalarha, who has never held formal employment, expressed her gratitude: "I do not take this opportunity lightly. I have a

son to provide for, and with the skills I have learned, I hope to make a profitable living."

The villages involved share a deep historical connection to Nelson Mandela—Qunu was his home after his father's ban, Mqhekezweni is where he grew up after his father's death, and Tyhalarha is the site of his Xhosa initiation.

Despite this heritage, unemployment remains high, with many women relying on child-support grants and mining wages.

The Imbokodo project is set to continue nurturing economic independence and cultural pride among the region's women, offering a model of community-driven development that the museum and ECPACC hope to replicate elsewhere.