

# The untold tale of Zolani Ntlokwana

By Rotondwa Raligidima, Potatoes SA

Zolani Ntlokwana was born in the Lujiko location in a rural town called Peddie in the Eastern Cape where he also completed his primary and secondary school education. His upbringing was simple but challenging.

Zolani and his late brother, Madodana, were raised by their grandfather, Thobile, after their single mother, Nomveliso (Mavis), moved to another city for work. She was a migrant worker. Zolani's family, like many others in the community, survived through farming and occasional odd jobs. As a young boy, one of his daily chores was to take care of the family's herd

of cattle, which entailed walking long distances and monitoring maize grown near the Great Fish River (eNxuba).

## An early interest in agriculture

Despite the hardships, Zolani was a bright and curious child, eager to learn about the world beyond his village. He showed interest in agriculture, particularly the economic aspect of it. Zolani's grandfather recognised his potential and encouraged him to take education seriously and work hard. Today, Zolani is a proud father of two children, a daughter, Lilitha Lethu, and a son, Awomi.

Upon matriculating he decided to pursue a career that contributes to food security and job creation. Through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) he pursued a BSc in Agricultural Economics at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape in 2006. This was followed by a BSc (Hons) degree in agricultural economics at Fort Hare.

In 2021, Zolani registered for an MSc in agricultural economics at Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape. This put him in a great position to contribute to the agricultural sector's sustainable development and policy formulation.

## The Potatoes SA connection

While a student at Stellenbosch University, Zolani learned of Potatoes SA's bursary opportunities on the university's website. He successfully applied and continued with his master's degree in 2022.

His research outlines the impact of internal and external factors on potato prices in South Africa with a focus on the grading regulations that govern potato classification. The study aims to understand the relationship between grading regulations and potato prices, to quantify the impact of these factors, identify key quality attributes influencing consumer decisions and provide policy recommendations based on empirical results.

The study recognises the importance of grading standards in the potato market and indicates that modifications to these standards have been advantageous for potato producers in the long term. However, it also emphasises the need for elasticity in grading standards to accommodate gradual changes in consumer perceptions, as abrupt changes can be expensive, and it may take time for consumers to adjust.

## A unique opportunity

Zolani presented his progress at the Potatoes SA Annual Research Symposium in Cape Town in 2022. He says this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, as it offered him an excellent opportunity to connect with researchers, participate in author panels, and discuss significant topics related to the potato industry. His memories of the symposium will be treasured forever, he says.

Zolani was offered the opportunity to work with the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land, and Environmental Affairs in



*Zolani Ntlokwana is a dynamic Potatoes SA bursary student making his mark in the South African potato industry.*

Mpumalanga as a senior agricultural economist. Among his responsibilities are the analysis and development of agricultural policies, the promotion of sustainable rural development, and the protection of the environment in the province.

### Honouring his grandfather

He embraced the opportunity with excitement and gratitude, knowing that his dedication to education and his passion for agriculture, brought him to this pivotal point in his life. With the invaluable lessons he learned from his grandfather, Zolani is ready to embark on a fulfilling journey of contributing to sustainable rural development in South Africa's agricultural sector.

"Even though my grandfather is no longer alive, I know he is proud of the man I've become. I am now able to take care of my kids and those who helped me grow up." Zolani has submitted the final draft of his thesis for his master's degree to his supervisors for review after which it

will be submitted for examination in September 2023. He is expected to graduate in December 2023.

### A hopeful future

Zolani has more than seven years' work experience during which he worked at Stellenbosch University as a research assistant in the Agronomy Department for six months and for five years as a skilled production operator at the Nestlé chocolate factory in East London. He also completed two years tutoring in agricultural economics at the University of Fort Hare.

Hei is extremely grateful towards Potatoes SA, and says he would not have been able to complete his studies without the bursary. Being part of the Potatoes SA programme allowed him to embark on his first-ever trips to the different provinces to attend Potatoes SA events such as the Transformation Symposium and the Research Symposium. "I would like to encourage other students who are unable to complete their studies due to financial challenges not to give

up but to use the bursary opportunity offered by Potatoes SA."

What does the future hold? Zolani hopes to find a permanent job, preferably in an environment concerned with agricultural economics. He aspires to start his own company which will allow him to give back to his childhood community, help advance society through technology and teach people how to farm productively. He plans to register for a PhD degree in agricultural economics at the University of the Free State in 2024.

Zolani's untold tale is one of hope. It is proof that no matter how humble one's beginnings, you can rise above the challenges, embrace knowledge and give back to the community. His journey exemplifies the power of education combined with dedication. 🌱

For more information regarding the Potatoes SA bursary programme, email [rotondwa@potatoes.co.za](mailto:rotondwa@potatoes.co.za).



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VOL 37 NO 5 • SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2023



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