

Kobelco SK220XD is Ka Lethabo Trading's first Excavator

An aptitude for mathematics has created opportunities for Mandisa Cele, owner of Ka Lethabo Trading in Pietermaritzburg. She has had a fulfilling career as a teacher and is now a successful entrepreneur and construction contractor with a Grade 5 CIDB rating.

She is also the proud owner of a new Kobelco SK220XD-10 Excavator that can be seen working on the extensive N3 upgrade project between Durban and Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal. Work includes the widening of the N3 carriageways to four or five lanes in each direction, and the reconfiguration and upgrade of most major interchanges along these route sections. Three key projects include the 19,4km stretch of road from Cato Ridge to Dardanelles (Umlaas Road) interchange, 26,6km from Dardanelle Interchange to Lynnfield Park and a 32km stretch from Lynnfield Park to Ashburton interchange.

Born and bred in Pietermaritzburg's Mbali township, Mandisa excelled at and enjoyed mathematics as a learner. Keen to pass on her love of mathematics to future generations, she studied and became a teacher.

An entrepreneurial spirit at heart, Mandisa established Ka Lethabo Trading in 2003, while still

teaching, and tried her hand at catering, fencing and selling clothing, among others. However, it was a passion for construction that drove her to enrol in a project management course that changed the course of her life.

"It was a joke on the course because everyone had to say why they were there. Everyone else was sent by the companies they worked for, but I had to make up a story and say that I was project managing renovations at my mother's house. Everyone was laughing because I had no real reason to be there, but afterwards I knew that I wanted to start working in construction," recalls Mandisa. "It was the management tools, techniques and the strategies that I learnt while doing that



Owner of Ka Lethabo Trader, Mandisa Cele (second from left) with her son and Operations Manager, Leo Cele (right), Site Foreman, Samkelisiwe Khumalo (left) and Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Nomthi Mazibuko.

course - how to maximise your profit by speeding up project delivery - that appealed to me. There were a lot of things that I learned there that I was keen to put into practice."

Government employees are not allowed to engage in government business, so Mandisa wasted no time in resigning as a teacher and registering on the Department of Transport's database. She was a natural from the outset: "I was invited to a meeting for entry level projects and when I got to the boardroom where the meeting was held, we were given formulas and training and told how to calculate for projects. It was my first time, but I was able to help other people who were not understanding. I got the first project I tendered on, and I think it was because of my calculations."

That was in 2008 and the project was installing guardrails in the KwaDukuza area. Mandisa worked with a Grade 1 CIDB rating until 2012 and 2013 when she successfully completed road re-gravelling and betterment of rural roads projects in the same area that elevated her to Grade 2 and then Grade 3 status.

According to Mandisa, lessons were learnt along the way. "During those projects I had plant challenges. I hired from reputable plant hire companies but there were a lot of breakdowns. When an excavator breaks down, but you have hired tipper trucks from another company, you still pay for those tipper trucks even though they are also standing. It was a good lesson to hire from only one company."

Executing two Grade 3 projects simultaneously saw Ka Lethabo Trading elevated to a Grade 5 CIDB rated company in 2021. With this rating the company most recently completed 10km of re-gravelling in the Ilembe District for the Maphumulo Local Municipality.

Most importantly the rating has created opportunity for Ka Lethabo Trading to invest in its own plant and equipment. In March 2021, the company was the only women-owned business out of five local subcontractors awarded a four-year contract to supply plant and equipment to Raubex Construction, the main contractor on the N3 upgrade project. Employing local subcontractors assists the JSE-listed company to achieve its contract participation goal of awarding 30% of the project to local businesses.

"I first bought three 10-ton tipper trucks. They are good second-hand trucks, 2017 and 2018 models with about 100 000km on the clock, and are performing well," says Mandisa. "I then applied for finance for a Kobelco 26-ton excavator, but the banks declined me. My Bell Sales Representative, Nomthi Mazibuko, has been a great support. She tried by all means to assist when the banks declined my application but, in the end, I raised cash for the smaller Kobelco SK220XD-10."

The Kobelco SK220XD-10 arrived on site at the end of May and was immediately put to work loading tipper trucks and performing other road building duties.

The decision to invest in a Kobelco Excavator was influenced by the company's experience with a Kobelco 26-ton Excavator that has not given any issues since they started hiring it in April 2021. "We have a relationship with the person who we are hiring the machine from, so we asked him about the Kobelco and he spoke highly of the brand and the machine. We liked that it has an air-conditioned cab and saves on fuel, especially with the recent fuel price increases but we still did our own checks with competitor machines and found that Bell offers better value for money. Bell is a reputable brand with a good footprint locally; that the Pietermaritzburg branch is only 20 minutes from our site made sense in terms of parts and support."