

Umbilo Express upsizes its fleet with JCB large plant

Bell Equipment and the Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA) have made a dream a reality for Nolly Khowa, the effervescent and ambitious owner of Umbilo Express Plant Hire in eThekweni, who is the proud new owner of a trio of new JCB machines.

Nolly's story is an uplifting one that speaks to the power of perseverance, hard work, and the kindness of mankind. After finishing school in 2007, she was employed as a hire desk controller for a well-known plant hire company. However, about a year later, when her mother passed away, she had to leave to take care of business at home and found work in the hotel industry as a barmaid, where she worked herself up the ladder until she reached her ceiling and wanted something more.

"That was in 2014," recalls Nolly, "and I went back to the plant hire industry, this time as a sales rep for the same plant hire company, but sales didn't gel with me. I'm stronger on the administration side, so I took the first position that became available at their hire desk. Later I was promoted to manage my own branch in Umbilo and in 2018 an opportunity arose to buy that same branch, which I did. I bought it with the aid of my previous boss (in the hotel industry), who signed surety for me.



"The business has been hiring out small plant since 2018 and cross-hiring larger equipment when we needed to. The ache for our own large plant started with an incident when we unknowingly hired a backhoe loader without a tracking device which got stolen on site. We decided that we needed our own large plant that we could manage and be responsible for rather than take a risk each time we hire," she adds.

Nolly decided on a skid steer, backhoe loader, and roller by monitoring the requests which came through in the form of hire enquiries and seeing which machines had been outsourcing the most. They believe that owning their own will give their business a competitive edge: "A lot of customers first request large plant to open and prepare sites. We usually miss out on this phase so we're hoping we can supply to them from inception with now having the JCB Skid Steer and JCB Backhoe Loader," Nolly explains.

They turned to Bell as their preferred equipment supplier because they have "always known the brand" from experience where they had outsourced Bell machines. "We also did research with existing customers and saw what brands of equipment they have of their own. We decided Bell is the best because we see it most often on sites and with our customers."

After speaking with Bell Equipment's experienced Sales Representative, Blake Phillips, Nolly settled on a JCB 155HD Skid Steer, a JCB 3DX Plus 4x4 Backhoe Loader, and a JCB CT260-120 Roller. The equipment was purchased through SEFA at a favourable interest rate.



Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Blake Phillips, congratulates Nolly Khowa, the owner of Umbilo Express Plant Hire, on acquiring a JCB Backhoe Loader, JCB Roller, and JCB Skid Steer, while her Sales Representative, Sitembiso Mbulwa (left) looks on.

A condition of the agreement – one that Nolly was only too happy to comply with – is that the machines are fitted with a tracking device. In the case of the Backhoe Loader and Roller, this is JCB's LiveLink telematics system.

Nolly anticipates strong demand for her trio. "I'm very excited for what the future holds because customers are currently paying high site establishment costs to hire machines from Pinetown and Durban North to work in our area, so having these machines available locally should be an advantage to us, especially for sites in the vicinity."

The young business owner prides herself on the level of service customers receive from Umbilo Express Plant Hire. "Many people look at our new logo and think we're a courier company and I say if that's the impression you are getting that's good because we deliver," she laughs. "We are known for our excellent service and strive to maintain this reputation when growing our equipment offering."

A testament to this claim is her experience after registering a new profile on Google Maps. "We sent a message to some of our customers and in one day we had 37 people gladly commenting and giving five-star ratings, which shows the good relationship we have with our customers, and how happy they are with our service. We might not have had the newest machinery in the market, but we were always right behind that equipment while on hire to ensure minimal to no downtime."

Umbilo Express Plant Hire serves Durban and the surrounding areas and employs twelve people, including Nolly. Three are the operators for the new JCB machines, who are employed on an ad hoc basis for now.

Whatever the future holds, there is an air of excitement and hope at Umbilo Express. Nolly is in an exciting phase of business development where she is being incubated for 18 months by the SAB Foundation's Tholoana Enterprise Programme. "This is incredibly valuable. It's a fantastic experience and we appreciate now having a mentor to guide us."