

Q&A WITH YVONNE RAKHUDUWE

Bokone Gas



CELEBRATING WOMEN IN BUSINESS

When did you decide to go into business and how has your journey been so far?

“ I am a professional nurse and whilst working in hospitals, I used to administer patients with medical oxygen. Over a period, I started to develop and interest in understanding how the oxygen was produced and packaged in cylinders. My husband is technically apt and we worked together to do the research. That is basically how we started out in our gas business. We started off as a small distributor as we did not have capital to finance our business idea at that time.

How difficult has it been for you as a businesswoman to establish yourself in business?

“ When we established the business, we started as a small distributor. We bought gas cylinders and sold them for a small profit. Our business started to grow and our customer base expanded. The challenge we had was that we had limited quantities of stock that we could secure from the producers, and this caused us to at times fail to deliver to customers. This compromised the trust we had built with our customers and we started to think of producing our own gas products so that we do not rely on other suppliers.

One of the greatest barriers was how are we going to finance the project as we did not have enough capital or even security to secure finance from traditional banks.

Do you think there is enough women business owners in the basic & specialty chemical sector, or do you think there is room for more women representation?

“ There are not enough companies in the basic and specialty chemical sector, especially producers/manufacturers. Indeed, more women need to be represented in this sector. This sector is largely dominated by white males from overseas and by multi-national companies. More black women-owned companies are needed to enter this industry.

IDC has partnered with you in your business, what has been the impact of their support?

“ To start a gas production project, requires quite huge capital and the IDC has assisted to fund the required Air Separation plant equipment and related bulk tanks, semi-trailers and gas cylinders. The IDC's financial and non-financial support in the form of its business support, has positioned our business in the market as a manufacturer. Our company now has the capacity to produce and deliver quality products cost effectively and on time to our customers. Furthermore, we have been able to create additional employment and support other black-entrepreneurs.

How many employees do you currently have?

“ When we started, we only had two employees. In the past 12 months we created 17 direct jobs and 30 indirect jobs. We are currently recruiting, and we target to employ an additional 20 employees in the current financial year.

Where do you want your business to be in ten years' time?

“ We have big dreams and aspirations. We are positioning ourselves to have a solid base and have a footprint across all nine provinces and to further expand to SADC region. We have already presented business proposition in Angola, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Swaziland with positive feedback. Our aspiration is to be the preferred medical and industrial gas supplier in Africa.

In the beginning, how did you learn about the IDC and its services?

“ Whilst we were frustrated as to how are we going to finance our business, we approached about four commercial banks, but the biggest problem was that we did not have security, so we could not secure any financing from them. Then as we were searching for alternatives, we approached SEFA and NEF, but due to the nature of our project, they suggested that our business profile has the potential to be supported by the IDC. That is how the journey began.

What advice would you give women who are planning to start or run their own businesses?

“ Business needs dedication and networking. When you run a business, you do not have fixed working hours. It is possible but you need to be committed. I like to use the quote that says "Your greatest opportunity for success lies right under your feet, your own acre of diamonds".

What is your general message to women as we wrap up Women's Month?

“ With what is currently happening globally, especially during these trying times as a result of COVID-19, we have experienced many challenges, especially gender-based violence affecting mostly us as women. We must unite and face the enemy. We must lead by example and say no to the corruption that is destroying the African continent. Women have potential to manage successful and sustainable businesses; all we need is to remain steadfast and resolute in achieving our goals and dreams.

You never know how strong you are, until being strong is the ONLY choice you have