

wise course of action

Nomgcobo Sangweni has experienced it all and, as KERRY DIMMER reveals, is using her knowledge to improve the lives of others

In January 1988, New York was abuzz with talk about a Broadway show at Cort Theatre. Rave reviews highlighted South African Mbongeni Ngema, writer and director of *Sarafina!*, who had created a dramatisation of the Soweto uprisings in a black protest musical depicting the racial politics of the South African townships during 1976.

The effect Ngema's *Sarafina!* had on audiences may have been powerful, but it was nothing compared to the role he played in lifting one Harlem resident from her circumstances as a housekeeper and struggling student.

Nomgcobo Sangweni was a South African refugee, desperate for acceptance and honour in a foreign land. An intelligent, educated and driven woman, her past experiences paralleled those portrayed in *Sarafina!*. Moved and inspired by her story, Ngema appointed Sangweni the cultural liaison officer for *Sarafina!* and paid her apartment rental for one year.

Sangweni describes Ngema as one of her 'eagles', a term she has coined for all those who have given her wings to realise her dreams. The impact of Ngema's kindness brought Sangweni to realise a simple truth: that along

any successful personal journey, the most striking rewards are not those of fame and fortune; but those that come from how and whom you help along the way.

'My life has been difficult, an often crumbled world where I lost my footing many times,' Sangweni says. 'But this is also true for millions of African women who have had to find ways to survive in countries troubled by political conflict. I am not alone, and it gives me no comfort to know that ... there are still too many women on our continent that remain marginalised and hindered by lack of resources.'

Sangweni wholeheartedly believes that women are the silent leaders, the unspoken heroes who drive change. 'But unfortunately, we too often disempower ourselves and one another,' she says.

'However, although circumstances beyond our control often leave us disillusioned, one thing is absolute: women stick together, and that is how we build strong families, tightly knit communities and great nations.'

It was within her own family that Sangweni encountered her initial eagles. Her grandparents became her 'parents of choice' after her father abandoned her and her younger sister.

'Our mother was only 24 and had to work as a housekeeper,' she recalls. 'And then there is Lena Cingo, my aunt. She became my mama. She is a woman of incredible vision, who wanted nothing less than to see me succeed. She made sure that I received an education in Cape Town, South Africa, after my grandparents passed away.'

'It was a very difficult time ... the townships in the 1960s and '70s were secretive places. Young as I was, I knew to keep quiet about the overnight stay of Winnie Mandela in our home and the activities of AC Jordan, both of whom were working against apartheid. I may not have understood entirely what was going on, but I knew I wanted to be part of it and be included in the whisperings. There was a great sense of unity.'

By 1971 Sangweni was happily married. She had a teacher's degree that she didn't really want, but an earlier failed stint at McCord's Hospital in an attempt to be a nurse left her feeling deflated. At the time she was living in Durban, which she describes as a hub of activism.

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Women and children were being arrested, and without telephones, communication was difficult. We at the Women's League were doing all we could to find those who were missing. We were absolutely passionate about pushing for answers, no matter what.'

It was probably the 'no matter what' that saw Sangweni herself arrested. She does not speak easily of those six months in detention, but there are indications that she suffered. For one thing she had a nine-year-old daughter who had been arrested with her. But her child was released to another 'eagle', close friend Wendy Ovens who, as a white woman harbouring a black child, was treading a fine line by associating herself with the apartheid struggle.

'It was my sister in New York who pestered Amnesty International to help negotiate my release. I fled to the Transkei for my sins,' she laughs. 'Sadly, my marriage failed, but I still have the highest respect for the father of my two children.'

Between Ovens and Sangweni's sister, tickets were provided for a new life in the US. But it was not quite what Sangweni envisaged. 'Although I'd achieved a degree in sociology before I left South Africa, jobs were hard to find, especially as a refugee. The ANC offices at 42nd Street allowed me to register for a master's degree but I still needed to support my children. That's when I began cleaning houses.'

It was obvious to those Sangweni encountered that she was not your average house cleaner, and the New Yorkers she worked for treated her like family, often paying more than was necessary, enabling her to save and study fastidiously. She finally managed to secure a position at the Department of Health where she remained for 14 years, qualifying as an epidemiologist.

'I wrote, was published and was honoured by the American Public Health Association. I dreamt of how wonderful it would be to go back to South Africa and head up a unit like the research and development one I worked for in the US.'

Homesick, Sangweni finally returned in 1994, smuggled through as a UN observer during the changeover to democracy. But it was in 1999 when a job offer in the health field lured her back permanently. This did not pan out and she was ready to return to New York when she met Willy Govender, an eagle in disguise.

His business model, Data World, was in the early stages of growth. A software development company that included property evaluations and the designing of IT business solutions, Data World was responsible for the demarcation of the South African municipalities after the first democratic elections.

Govender and Sangweni built the company, forging along the way a strong relationship of mutual respect. 'We pushed borders, constantly looking for ways to

do things differently,' says Sangweni, 'and although it was a far cry from my background in the health industry, it presented me with fresh, very exciting new challenges.'

As she now approaches retirement, Sangweni is less involved in Data World. She prefers rather to focus her energy on the development of rural communities, particularly those in KwaZulu-Natal, as a member of the Bambithuba Women's Development project.

Here she has helped to raise funds for elderly support, abandoned children and training in HIV/Aids care. Importantly, Sangweni feels it time for her to speak, and participate in, the issues so dear to her heart. To countries hosting refugees she says: 'See them not as threats. They need to be embraced, they have lost so much, shown courage and often have skills that will help and that can create small enterprises. Find ways to let them live among you.'

To women, Sangweni says: 'Your strength lies in unity and empowerment. Build your communities and have a voice. Do not be a witness to apathy, stop victimising yourself and aid will come.'

Along her journey, Sangweni also served as a director of Amnesty International. 'It's time for me to give back,' she says. 'This is the purpose of my life today.' In so doing, what Sangweni has yet to realise is that she has clearly become an eagle herself. **AD**