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Mabuza-Suttle, Is A Living Legend

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Felicia Mabuza-Suttle is a South African born international award winning entrepreneur, highly acclaimed talk show host, sought after speaker, lively emcee and a best selling author.

Currently, she is a host of her own talk show, *Conversations with Felicia*, on The Africa Channel in the United States.

Dr. Mabuza-Suttle is also the President and co-owner of Leadership Success International, LLC, which specializes in executive leadership training, employee motivation, team building and business communications consulting.

Historical records note that Dr. Mabuza-Suttle is the most recognized woman in southern Africa thanks to her talk show. Filmed and aired on local television in South Africa, the show is appropriately called *Felicia*.

Besides being a successful talk show host, she is also an international recognized business woman, columnist, public speaker, and a mother.

She considers herself not just a celebrity but also a crusader whose mission is to bring South Africans together and encourage tourists to invest in the country.

Dr. Mabuza-Suttle was born on June 3, 1950, in Sophiatown, a black community in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the apartheid era when every facet of life was racially segregated.

She was raised by her grandfather Ben Mabuza whom she credits today as having been the force that influenced her to get where she is today. Ben Mabuza was a self-made business man, who owned and operated a butchery and a restaurant near downtown Johannesburg.

Her website reported that when awakening the children in the morning her grandfather would remind them:

“You are sleeping and the white man is making money.... Only people who work hard get rich.” Even though Ben Mabuza was considered wealthy, he was down-to-earth and insisted on doing the cooking and waiting on his customers himself. Meanwhile, Mabuza-Suttle’s dad owned one of the first driving schools in South Africa, which provided the family with a very good income.

Mabuza-Suttle enjoyed school but she also loved to dance, which led her to enroll in ballroom dancing. Glamour, as portrayed in popular black glossy magazines of the day, like *Zonk* and *Drum*, was highly publicized, and many young girls aspired to be cover girls, including Mabuza-Suttle. She did end up on the cover of *Drum*.

In the 1960s and the 1970s an exodus of black South Africans were going abroad into exile or to study.

Mabuza-Suttle was one of the lucky ones who got the opportunity to study in the United States. Clinging to what her grandfather instilled in her, she wanted to be the first Mabuza to earn a college degree.

Before leaving South Africa, Mabuza-Suttle had not been politically involved, but while working for the *World Newspaper*, she had a chance to meet many well known activists including Steve Biko, the leader of Black Consciousness Movement who would tragically be murdered while under detention.

Ironically, it is in the United States, many years later, that she would awaken politically as she joined the majority of African Americans to protest and advocate for sanctions against South Africa.

It is also in the United States that she would meet and marry the father of her two daughters, Earl Suttle. Suttle, then a school psychologist, was chaperoning a dance class in Milwaukee when he met Mabuza-Suttle, who, unbeknownst to him, was new in town.

Furthermore, the two hit it off. Later, she sought his advice on where to attend college, and Suttle recommended Marquette University where he taught. It was the beginning of a long relationship.

When Mabuza-Suttle returned briefly to South Africa to work for Radio Bophutatswana in 1982, she was criticized for being politically naive and incorrect. Bophutatswana was one of the artificially created Black homelands by the South African apartheid government to disenfranchise blacks.

Not a single nation in the world recognized the governments of the Black homelands. Many felt they were working for the enemy.

Dismissing her critics Mabuza-Suttle acknowledges that at least she was reaching South Africans and would do so by whatever means available including working for a “homeland radio” station.

Mabuza-Suttle went on to earn a BA degree in journalism and an MA in Mass Communication from Marquette University in Wisconsin. The first ten years of their marriage, the Suttles lived all over the United States, including Fort Meyers, Fort Lauderdale, Houston, Charlotte, Atlanta.

Many years later Mabuza-Suttle would settle in South Africa, and her husband would remain in the United States; theirs would be long distance relationship.

The couple’s saga began in 1990, when anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela, newly released from prison, made a plea encouraging South Africans living abroad to return and help to reshape the new democratic nation. Joining her other prodigal countrymen, Mabuza-Suttle returned back to her country of birth.

First she accepted a job as Manager of Corporate Affairs with the South African Airways. It was a very exciting time in South Africa, where complete political change was taking place. The hated apartheid regime and all traces of racial segregation had been eliminated and a newly elected popular government was opening doors to all kinds of opportunities and black empowerment.

Then opportunity came knocking in 1992, when the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) offered Mabuza-Suttle a job to host a talk show that would engage audience participation in a manner similar to the *Donahue* and *Oprah Winfrey* shows in the United States.

The talk show was a new concept in South Africa, and Mabuza-Suttle’s show became an overnight hit.

She commented in *Ebony*, “I knew I could use television, a medium I had studied to help in the rebuilding process.” Today Mabuza-Suttle is commonly referred to as the “South African Oprah.”

At the beginning she was allocated a very small budget, hardly enough for an audience, but she took it as a challenge and went on to tape 3 shows every Sunday, which enabled her to build a loyal audience.

Initially the program, featuring a mixed race audience, was called *Top Level*, with topics focused on the social issues driven by the political changes taking place in the country such as affirmative action, desegregation, capital punishment, etc.

The timing was just right as the country was preparing for the first black vote and many citizens were taking a new pride in the state of the nation.

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The program was extended to an hour. One week she might feature "Rare Syndromes and Diseases," and the next might be "South Africa's Talented Kids." In this she believes she is both educating and entertaining. As she told Sean Houghton, "My dream has always been to try and unite South Africans through communication.... In South Africa, television tries to educate and inform too hard, they should also entertain.... Even information and education can be presented in such a way that it becomes entertaining.... We need to refocus and as far as Felicia Mabuza-Suttle is concerned, television has to entertain first, and inform and educate last."

The show has made a difference in some people's lives such as, the families who have been reunited, the men whose paternity identity has been verified, and the doctors who have volunteered their services to perform complicated corrective surgeries.

Some guests have found employment and shelter through Mabuza-Suttle's program. But her crusade has encountered a few barriers along the way, leading some to criticize her for making false promises. For example, a handicapped woman from Soweto, the largest black community in South Africa, appeared on the show.

One week later the Felicia office informed the guest of an "American guy" who had offered to build a house for her. Weeks turned into months and nothing materialized.

When questioned, a staff person from the show confirmed that an American guest had made a promise to build a house but unfortunately never came through.

Mabuza-Suttle told News24 that "we do get feedback from viewers who voice concerns on the various plights of our guests. But there is little we can do if guests don't fulfill their promises."

As Mandela was being ushered in as the first Black president, South Africa entered a Black empowerment boom. New companies were being listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and Black representation on corporate boards was increasing.

Mabuza-Suttle found herself serving on various boards. Together with a group of other women, she formed Pamodzi Investment Holding, South Africa, a consortium of investments that began with a small capital of three million rand. The estimated value in 2003 was approximately 100 million rands.

Following her grandfather's footsteps in restaurant business, Mabuza-Suttle has capitalized on her show to create business ventures, becoming a skilled marketer.

She is a partner in a successful restaurant called Back O' Moon, located at Gold Reef City, a five-star hotel in South Africa. The restaurant features international cuisine and a jazz club. She has also launched her own Mabuza-Suttle eyewear, shoes, and clothing, and says on her website:

"Many of my fans have asked me when I am coming up with my own range of clothing or accessories, and I am happy to say it's here. The new range of clothing is a modest replica of the expensive suits I wear—simple, yet stylish and affordable."

A portion of her eyewear proceeds go to the Felicia Mabuza-Suttle Trust, an anti-drug and anti-crime campaign she developed.

In 2000 her show moved to ETV, the largest English speaking channel, in South Africa. The show is now simply called Felicia and is produced by her company, FMS. The show is reported to have come to an end in 2004 from public TV in South Africa.

The Star/Agfa Award for Popular Television Personality, 1995; Ralph Metcalfe Award, Marquette University, 1999; People's Choice Award for Entertainment, Vivid, 2000; People's Choice Award for Humanitarianism, Vivid, 2000; All University Alumni Merit Award, Marquette University, 2000; Tribute Achievers business category finalist, 2001; Soweto Legends Award, 2001; Prestige Rapport and City Press Achievers, 2001; Business Woman of the Year, 2001 are some of the awards and honors she has received over the years.

Source photo <http://www.feliciainc.com/>