

QUEENS of the NEW NORMAL

Sometimes being boxed in (we're looking at you, COVID-19) is all you need to think outside of the box – these four inspiring women did just that by **LAUREN ENDRODY**

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Words to... LIVE BY

'Just start – don't wait for things to be perfect before you start, otherwise you never will. And find a mentor or a support system. It has made things so much easier for me!'



'We went from 60 bags of cookies a week to 400!'

Bongi Msipha (50) from Cape Town took her cookie business to the next level, all thanks to clever marketing and a strong online presence.

❖ THE IDEA

I've been working at the Wynberg-based company, Amazing Spaces, for five years, cooking lunch for the ladies. We started baking choc-chip cookies as a gift for the clients, but everyone loved them so much, they asked if they could buy them. And just like that, we decided to start selling, branded as Mama Bongi. That's when Julia Finnis-Bedford (the MD of Amazing Spaces) said she thinks there's

an opportunity for me to build a little business. We were only supplying to a few delis, mostly Dalebrook Cafe in Kalk Bay and Chardonnay in Constantia.

❖ WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

I was very lucky – people started buying lots of cookies! In lockdown, we ran out of packaging, but a friend gifted us the craft bags we now use, with 'Made by Mama Bongi' handwritten on them. The cookies started to fly and we went from about 60 bags a week to 400! More and more delis asked about our cookies. We felt very lucky to be working during this time when so many people were not able to.

❖ THE BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

Julia did an Instagram course and it made a huge difference because, as

soon as we took to Instagram, my cookies and I became known quickly – and now we have over 4 500 followers. Also, my friend Kate built a website that allowed for online orders, which is so important right now in this climate.

❖ WHAT LIES AHEAD

We started out with a classic choc-chip cookie, and then we developed a vegan cookie, which has done very well. We hope to be able to buy a commercial mixer soon, so that we can supply more. My dream has always been to make a difference in people's lives. We have already created one full-time job and hope to create more.



Words to...
LIVE BY

'There is no such thing as the "perfect time". The only time is now.'



@plettproduce

'We had to find something to do with the surplus fresh produce'

Alexandra Edwards (27) launched Plett Produce with boyfriend Kieran to supply locals with fresh produce from the farms, after their main clients, the restaurants, were closed down.

❖ THE IDEA

Kieran owns a farm, and that's his main business. He grows various different seasonal produce and sells it to local restaurants, grocery stores and other suppliers like our neighbour, the Elephant Sanctuary. While he does that, I run my own marketing agency that does social media management and website design for both local and international clients.



❖ WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

When COVID-19 hit, I wasn't that affected (luckily!). I lost one client, which was a bit stressful at the time. But Kieran was quite badly affected because the restaurants he supplied to had to close their doors, which left him with about 50% reduction in income. We knew a lot of farmers in the area were experiencing a similar fate because Plett is quite a tourism hotspot, and we have some amazing

restaurants. With them closing, we were left trying to figure out what to do with the surplus fresh produce.

❖ THE BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

Kieran and I had the idea of merging our skill sets and creating an online platform for all the different producers and local suppliers to sell their veggies, eggs, milk, cheeses, other tinned produce, jams and so forth. Then we just packed it for them and got it delivered to people's houses every Wednesday and Friday. We had to rethink the way we were supplying produce and how, as a community, we could come together. So the plan to create this online platform helped us to get local, seasonal, fresh produce from the farmers directly to consumers, rather than it going from farmers to retail chains and then to the consumers. This

has been one of the biggest ways that we shifted the farm business.

❖ WHAT LIES AHEAD

With restaurants opening again and consumers going back to normal habits, we are focusing on creating a supply chain for restaurants, primarily from local farmers in the area. We're taking the principles of Plett Produce – where produce went directly from farmers to consumers – and applying that to restaurants. Instead of them having to go through larger national distributors and purchasing huge market quantities, which are lower quality and cheaper, they can come to us. We are on the same national level in terms of pricing, but source from local farmers who (about 90% of them) also follow organic farming practices.

'My greatest hit was the hot chocolate bomb'

Heike Lubbe (59), from Cape Town, managed tours for a local tour operator before the pandemic shut down the tourism industry. So she opened Dez's Deli, a start-up that sources and packages treats and gifts.

❖ THE IDEA

Before lockdown, I was in the tourism industry. I was working for an inbound tour operator and obviously, with no more tourists arriving in the country, many tour operators had to go the salary cut- or retrenchment route.

❖ THE BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

The name is a play on my husband's name, Desmond, as I thought it had a catchy ring to it. We started off by selling biltong, droëwors and some frozen meat products such as burger patties, mince and boerewors, which were outsourced. But it wasn't enough variety for our customers, so I found someone who could supply me with honey, and then I added my very own strawberry, gooseberry and blueberry jams, sweet mustard and muesli. All our products are home-made and preservative-free. During the Christmas period last year, I developed different edible gifts to sell. My greatest hit was the Hot Chocolate Bomb. I want to carry these ideas forward to other special days such as Mother's and Father's Day. I also created a website, and sales have mainly been through the online platforms, as well as at a few markets.

❖ WHAT LIES AHEAD

I'm not sure what direction Dez's Deli will go as yet, as I'm constantly updating the product offerings. Right now, I've added apricot jam, mixed fruit coulis and beetroot preserve, and I am still playing around with chutney recipes.



Words to...
LIVE BY

'You've got to find passion and ideas and run with it. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Pure hard work. That's all it takes.'



'We found that the connections online had to change'

Yashmita Bhana (50) from Johannesburg owns Nihka Technology Group and, during lockdown, launched a foundation that aims to introduce technologies into mainstream education that have a positive social impact on kids with disabilities.

❖ THE IDEA

The Nihka Technology Group has always centred around initiatives that talk to our core ethos: positive social impact. We implement realistic digital transformation strategies for organisations, driven by our #EQintoAI philosophy of doing clean, transparent business that honours the code of dignity to all users at all times. Our lifelong dream was realised earlier this year: To establish a non-profit to empower children and women, and to focus on the inclusion of children with disabilities. And so, Dhiya Development Foundation was born. It is already on track to implement connectivity and digital training projects for schools around South Africa.

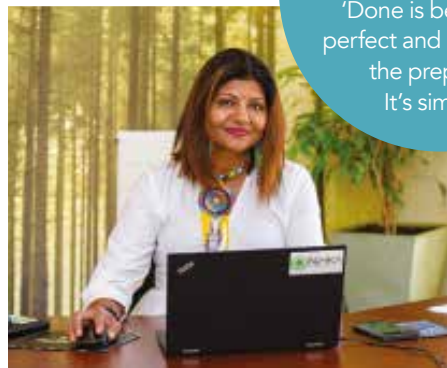
❖ WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

God's grace has certainly been upon us. Our business continued robustly despite pandemic restrictions – this was in great part thanks to the fact that we already had a culture of working remotely. Our business is built upon developing and maintaining the cyber health of large organisations. As many organisations took the work-from-home route during lockdown, the requirement on our cyber management programmes increased, bringing even more work into our realm. As a business owner, I saw how the team really missed the robust discussions we did together. Although we have always had remote teams dialling in for video conferencing, the physical environment was where creativity came through for problem-solving. Replicating this online was challenging.



Words to...
LIVE BY

'Done is better than perfect and luck meets the prepared. It's simple.'



❖ THE BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

During lockdown, we quickly found that the connections online had to change. Our coffee-connect sessions with remote teams were extremely well received. We didn't talk about work but wanted to find out how everyone was doing with family, kids, load-shedding and all the other issues that make us South African and African. We were just talking 'life', not business – just to connect. This further emphasised our company philosophy in how we implement solutions and do business – Bringing EQ into AI. Even before the pandemic, all of our work was on how we bring in social impact. Now, we are becoming more focused on how each project is aligned with issues that South Africa faces. Our focus is aligned with the #TechForGood global movement, inspiring the #NihkaForGood approach. Not much has changed in our ethos but our purpose has become clearer. It has always been about running a business with a conscience. Knowing that whatever we do in the business, we need to have an awareness of its overall impact on the consumer, as well as the societies it serves. Doing business with consciousness is how we always aim to deliver.

❖ WHAT LIES AHEAD

The Dhiya Development Foundation was inspired by my daughter Dhiya, who was born with Down's syndrome. It is aimed at including the youth in digital technologies, as well as the introduction of technologies into South Africa that can have a positive social impact on kids with disabilities in mainstream education. My daughter's unyielding positive spirit to push through any and all challenges she has faced imbues this Foundation with its purpose of being. She's expertly articulated technology into her constant engagement with the world and this continues to be the goal – to inspire all children who need it, and to connect corporates and schools with interesting starter technologies that can integrate, bringing connectivity and learning to all areas of South Africa.