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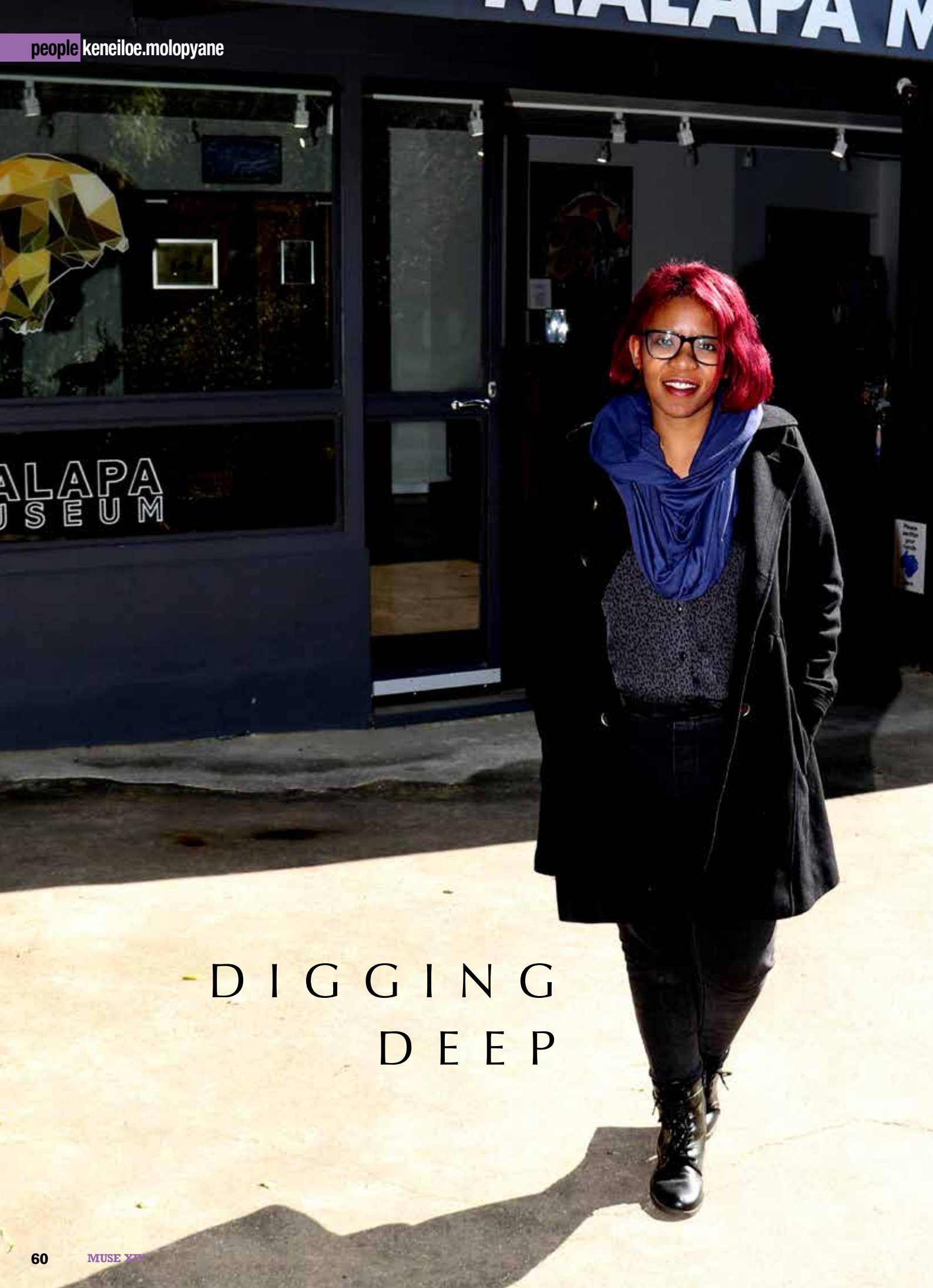
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DIGGING DEEP

From caves to oceans, Dr Keneiloe Molopyane dove deep to find answers about our history's unknown. Muse's Thuveshnie Govender learns more about her fantastic journey as a woman of colour who's changing the narrator's voice in the fields of archaeology and anthropological science.

Photos Janine Greenleaf

it all started when a seven-year-old Keneiloe Molopyane from Benoni, Johannesburg, fell in love with the *Adventures of TinTin* comics. Enamoured by the adventures, the artefacts found, and the stories uncovered by TinTin, she found a deep love and admiration for archaeology. This set her on a path to becoming one of the most recognisable names in the archaeological field in our country. Dr Molopyane now has her doctorate in bioanthropology, is an archaeologist, bioanthropologist, paleoanthropologist, expert excavator, explorer at National Geographic, a character in a comic book, and a lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand (to name a few).

Named as one of National Geographic's 50 emerging explorers in 2021 and now a fully-fledged NatGeo explorer – only achievable if you are nominated by a member – Dr Molopyane has been on a path that can only be described as serendipitous. "I didn't plan on becoming an explorer. That was really nice; it makes you feel like you're doing something right, and someone's watching you and is impressed, so much so that they would recommend you to National Geographic to help you reach your potential."

But there were many things Dr Molopyane didn't plan for.

"Initially, I wasn't very excited about being a lecturer. I didn't think of myself as a teacher and didn't think I taught

very well... but it turns out I'm not that bad! And so I fully embraced this role!" she says. This also led her to do a TED Talk in 2022 on how exploration is the key to discovery. Dr Molopyane notes that her line manager once explained how crucial it is for transformation and representation and for students to see someone who looks like them in the field. This notion grew even more when she eventually became a leading face in the industry as a person of colour, continuously paving the way to success.

A rising voice

When asked how she feels to be looked up to by so many aspiring archaeologists and scientists, Dr Molopyane says that while it's been great to slowly change the voice of the field from the white man (or, if you're lucky, white woman) to a voice from a person of colour, she did find being one of the first WOC faces in the media in this field, exhausting. **She'd essentially become a poster child for people of colour in the cultural sciences.**

"Great as it is, I don't want to be the only one. At some point, it becomes too much." She understands the need for more than one voice within a spectrum. So, whenever opportunities arose, she would do her utmost to include others who'd done respectable work in the field, those with their own stories and journeys that may be

relatable to others. "One of the things Lee Berger [American-born South African paleoanthropologist] taught me throughout this whole experience is that when you rise, you need to raise others with you," says Dr Molopyane with a smile.

So, when she was approached by the creator of the *Super Scientist* cards, Dr Justin Yarrow, to create a character based on herself and her skills, she also pulled some of her colleagues into his vision. Thus, a paleoscience crew and a spectacular comic book series called *Super Scientists Dig In* was born! Dr Molopyane's character is Bones, whom she loves! "I love the comic book, and you know Bones is a nickname my friends gave me. So, when the opportunity came to create this character, I thought, let's make Bones a real person. When the cards came about, we then developed the comic book; now we're working on an animation series pilot!"

Reflecting on the challenges of being a woman of colour in the field, Dr Molopyane notes there are many, but what really helped was having a solid support system and people who had her back. Then, as she evolved from a student into a lecturer, she realised she now had to be that person for others, which meant standing up for herself and others and taking on the role of a protector. "It's difficult, it really is, but you learn to deal with it, you learn to develop a thick skin. With great power comes great responsibility, which can

be made more accessible by having the right people with you."

She advises her students and other young explorers not to specialise too quickly in their fields; being open to obtaining a wide array of skills and meeting people will help create more opportunities for them. More than anything, Dr Molopyane asserts that many opportunities exist. "It's all a leap of faith!"

How it all began

"I'm very stubborn and quite tenacious, too. When I have an idea, I don't stop until I finish it. I really hate being sidetracked. I just keep trying to get where I need to," says Dr Molopyane, reflecting on her path. Never the traditional academic, she always knew that sitting in an office writing academic papers and books was different from what she wanted out of her degree. Instead, she kept testing the waters and taking opportunities where she found them. Her journey started with a fan letter to Professor Joe Fletcher from the University of York in the UK. "During my post-grad, after my honours, I wrote a letter to Professor Fletcher. I used to binge-watch her show on BBC about Egyptian mummies. She's a mummy specialist, and I really like that. So, I wrote her a letter telling her how much she inspired me, and she wrote back, which I wasn't expecting! She said I sounded like a cool kid and thought I'd be a great candidate to study for my master's degree at the University of York in the UK. And I was like, cool... SHIT!" she reminisces.

It didn't end there; after living abroad for the first time and returning to SA with her masters in hand, Dr Molopyane needed a job. A Facebook ad led her to a Maritime Archaeology Internship at Iziko Museums in Cape Town. "I didn't plan the underwater archaeology thing at all. I was like, I can swim, do archaeology, and learn how to dive. So, I took that leap of

faith, and an opportunity landed." However, the diving experience had its discomforts. Speaking about the differences between diving in a lake and the ocean, Dr Molopyane explains how she had to learn a few tricks to get used to the density and dynamic movement around her. "I actually got seasick underwater, because everything was moving, and my body was still. It was tough, but I managed to control it with medication. Or sometimes meds wouldn't work, and then I'd end up having to hold my breath, puke a little bit into my mouth, pull my regulator out and feed the fish, then just shove the regulator back in," she says, laughing.

Dr Molopyane's passion for speaking the language of bones and translating what could have been of the past is rooted in fearless passion. You only need to watch the Netflix documentary *Unknown: Cave of Bones*, in which Dr Molopyane was the lead excavator in a team of scientists led by Professor Lee Berger, in *The Rising Star Cave* at the Cradle of Humankind, to witness this passion. "I have learnt that if you want opportunities to come to you, you have to take the risk and put yourself out there. The only way to get what you're asking for, is to ask for it."

Dr Molopyane accredits all her excavating knowledge and skills to one of her most incredible supporters, Associate Professor Alex Schoeman. "All my excavation skills have come from her. She's been my long-time mentor, so when I told her I was interested in human bones but didn't know how to work with archaeology, she found an honest project for me that involved human bones from an archaeological site... and that started it. She's like my mom."

How it all began

Speaking of family, whilst remembering her struggles during her PhD, Dr Molopyane expresses how

her parents, both medical doctors, told her to go into medicine as she could still become a doctor and work with bones. Determined as ever, she became a doctor in biological anthropology and now gleefully asserts that she is the real doctor in the family as she holds a Doctorate. "I wish we still had landlines because then if a caller comes through and says, 'Hey, I would like to speak to Doctor Molopyane', I could say, okay, which one? There are three," she says with a laugh.

Struck by a sudden memory, she continues, "There's this one photo of me with my parents when they're still at med school, and I'm a baby, maybe four or five months old. Three generations of doctors in this photo – my mom loved it so much." The love goes on as she cheerfully describes how her brothers are just as impressive, with her older brother a sports scientist and baby brother working in gaming technology. "One thing my parents did really successfully is allow their children to follow their passions," she says with pride. And follow her passion she did.

The year is still young, and Dr Molopyane is moving towards greater heights, and so can you. As her journey has proven, the world is changing, and there is room for different voices to narrate the new discoveries made. "The tools you need are a dream, a great support system, grabbing your chances and hard work." 🍌

Top: The Malapa Fossil Cave cover and viewing platform in the Cradle of Humankind Reserve.

Middle: Dr Molopyane and Professor Lee Berger at the Gladysvale site in the Cradle. Thousands of fossils have been recovered from here including rare remains of hominids.

Bones' playing card.

Dr Molopyane's TED Talk in JHB.

