



Eunike van den Schyff of Nelspruit Blinds and Flooring, Buks Esterhuizen of Lowvelder and Charlene Steinmann of Capital Mbombela.

# Man who strives to give tourism a lift honoured

Chelsea Pieterse

**MBOMBELA** - The cream of the crop gathered at Mbombela Stadium on Thursday June 2 to find out just who would receive the Lowveld's ultimate accolade, the Best of Mbombela 2021 Readers' Choice Awards.

Held in the presidential suite of the stadium, guests rubbed shoulders with some of the Lowveld's biggest names in the business, whether it be restaurants, cars, repairs, finances, education, beauty, houses and even dogs.

With beautifully arranged finger foods lining the back walls of the suite, guests helped themselves to the delectable snacks and beverages on offer.

A winners' booklet will be published soon with all the names of the awardees

Once everyone had arrived, eaten and socialised, the announcements of the various awards and the winners began.

The final awardee for the event, who is known to most Lowvelders and is a name that has become synonymous with entrepreneurship, local tourism and a deep love of the province, was Mpumalanga's own Oupa Pilane.

Speaking to Lowvelder about his award, his home town and his love for its people, Pilane said there are few places in the world that can compare to the Lowveld.

"This community is resilient and the people are amazing - always willing to raise their hands if called upon for help," said Pilane.

"It's a community of men and women who have for years worked hard and done incredible things for themselves without waiting for handouts from anyone. I can say I have learnt and still continue to learn from the people of the Lowveld. I consider these communities as my fountain of wisdom," he said.

Speaking on the importance of Best of Mbombela, Pilane said the platform is more relevant now than ever. "There are so many challenges facing our people - the sluggish economy, high unemployment rate, the growing poverty, corruption and the effects of Covid. The awards have become a spark bringing light and hope to our people."

"I am thankful that the management of Lowvelder has deemed it fit to continue honouring men and women who work hard to not only provide for their families, but all those who are in their employment and the community at large.

"I saw the faces of the nominees and the winners. I saw how happy they were and it was such a marvel to watch."

When asked about how he felt about

receiving his award, Pilane said it was definitely unexpected. "I held back my tears as I have never experienced anything like that in my whole life," he said.

"It was very emotional for me to receive such recognition. I have been an activist since an early age. My quest has always been to improve the lives of our people in any platform I can contribute in. We don't do the work to receive awards. We do the work to serve God and His people. It is, however, so motivating if your own community recognises your contribution. It's even better when that community acknowledges such contributions in public."

Pilane said he was humbled by the award. "This is my first award of this kind and that's what makes it so special. I will forever cherish that moment. I have received business awards before, but they were for business and not for me as a person. I thank God always for this journey of my life. This has really made me a happy man."

Pilane said the award will continue to motivate him to do what he does. "I don't work alone, but with a team in the tourism sector. Tourism is a catalyst that can ignite economic growth and be better used as a tool to transform the structure of our economy. We need more young people in this sector, we need to build more businesses that can create jobs for our people."

"We need to bring more tourists to our Lowveld and ensure that they have a memorable experience and are safe so that they can come back and also be our brand ambassadors for our destination."

However, he said this would not all happen on its own. "It needs men and women who are willing to roll up their sleeves and do the work without expecting any rewards or accolades. These soldiers will be ridiculed and called names but their resilience and contribution will be recorded in the minds and hearts of our people and most importantly God will be on their side."

"I will continue to be one of those people, without fear or favour. I will continue to do my advocacy work in tourism because it's the right thing to do. If not us, who? If not now, when?"



Semakie Mlombo of Mr Price Home i'langa Mall and Winnie Mkhonto of Ocean Basket.



Riaan Loubser of Unigrad College Nelspruit and Sandra Jacobs of Innibos.



Kim Buckland of Sabie Valley Coffee and Mduduzi Ngcobe of Turn n Tender Crossing Centre.



Marrillee Franken and Sonja Zaaime of Purple Ribbon Boutique Westend.

## Oupa Pilane lives by principles of ubuntu

**MBOMBELA** - A man of passion, a man who gets things done and an outspoken activist who campaigns on behalf of the tourism industry in Mpumalanga and South Africa.

Ikaneng "Oupa" Pilane needs no introduction. He is a self-made entrepreneur, tourism development consultant, local government specialist, business coach, and preacher who is intently focused on organisational, personal, tourism and business development.

Oupa Pilane spent a large part of his career as a communication spokesperson in provincial government. He started his career as the first spokesperson of the former premier of Mpumalanga, Dr Mathews Phosa.

His Wits master's degree, with a major in macro economic policy, industrial and trade policy, advance topics in political economy and the labour market, has helped Oupa successfully establish himself in the business community as a bigger-picture thinker who is able to transform ideas into business opportunities.

Oupa believes events are an important element in promoting destinations and attracting tourists to the Lowveld. He has partnered with the MTPA and the Department of Culture, Sports and Recreation to promote music and lifestyle events in Mpumalanga, bringing many visitors to the beautiful Lowveld.

His visionary approach can be seen in his business ventures. He is the co-founder of the Graskop Gorge Lift Co, a world-class attraction that drew 130 000 visitors in its first year of operation. The lift has a custom-designed passenger-viewing elevator that drops you off from the grassy cliff-top plateau into the cool mountain forest below. An extensive network of elevated walkways, suspension bridges and interactive exhibits lead you along the forest trails and across the streams, keeping you engaged in this natural and pristine environment.

Some of his esteemed leadership positions include his role as national deputy chairperson of the Southern African Tourism Services Association, co-chairperson of the Mpumalanga Tourism Think Tank and chairperson of Kruger Lowveld Tourism, the Ehlanzeni Regional Tourism Organisation in Mpumalanga. He sits in the KLCBT as a board member, of which he is a former president.

*Oupa Pilane, you live the principles of ubuntu, your work and dedication is recognised and celebrated by the Lowveld community.*

*We are proud to present you the Lowveld Community Special Award.*



Graskop Gorge Lift Company co-founder Oupa Pilane, Caxton's Irma Green and Stabilis' Henri Pieters.



See more photos on [lowvelder.co.za](http://lowvelder.co.za)

Oupa Pilane said he was humbled by the award and thanked the community.

