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LYSE COMINS

**C**HATTING in her modest office overlooking the lush Chris Saunders Park in uMhlanga, Vino Govender exudes a poised, yet relaxed confidence, as any woman who has broken the glass ceiling in a traditionally male-dominated sector should do.

She is managing director and a major shareholder of LA Consulting Engineers in a field still largely dominated by older white men. She has an impressive array of certificates and awards on her office wall, including the latest accolade, the Margaret Hirsch Business Woman Achiever of the Year Award.

The company employs 30 staff at its local head office and in Port Elizabeth. As a medium-sized civil and structural engineering concern, it has worked on scores of built environment projects including major housing, clinic, school and road developments across the country.

But this unassuming daughter of descendants of indentured sugar cane labourers, raised as one of six siblings in Gingindlovu in KwaZulu-Natal, is not puffed up about her success.

She openly shares her triumphs over the tragedy of widowhood and how she beat depression, and the odds facing women in the corporate world.

But she far prefers to focus on how life's cruel blows have stirred her passion to change people's lives through her motivational talks and caring actions.

Devoted to charity work, in her spare time she can be found working with her 20-year-old son Deon, spreading love in old age homes and orphanages, visiting the sick, encouraging troubled teens and giving food to the poor.

But Govender says it has been an arduous journey to get to the point of having a rewarding professional career as well as the time and energy to be able to give back to society.

After matriculating at Stanger Secondary School in 1989, she worked long, hard hours, self-funding her studies towards a BCom degree.

Her first job was as a cashier at a takeaway in Eshowe, so it made sense when she abandoned her childhood dream to become a nurse to pursue a career in finance.

"I was accepted to study nursing (at Addington Hospital), but they told us we were not allowed to marry for three years. I went for the uniform fitting but decided I couldn't do it. I was 18 and wanted to get married."

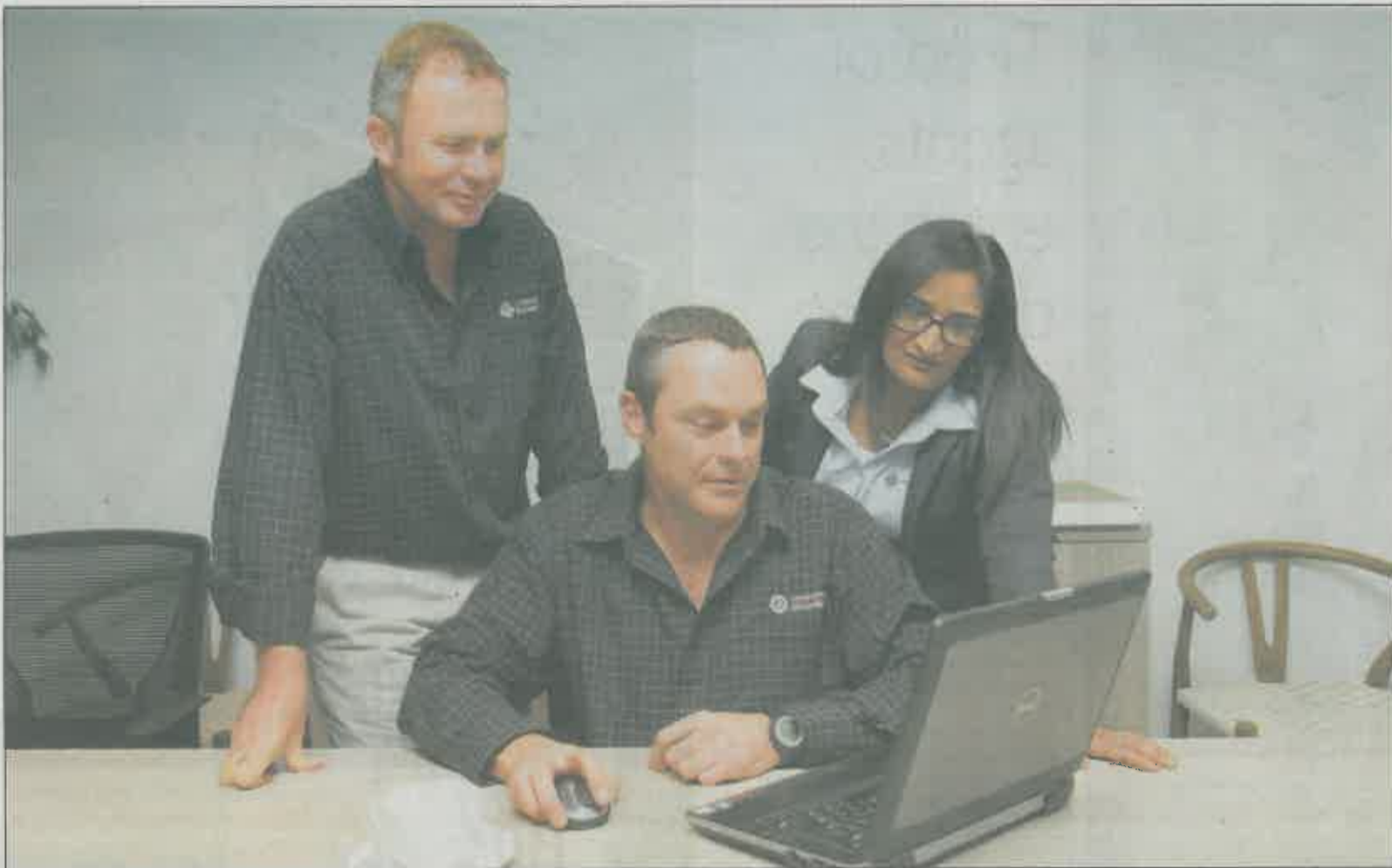
She married at the age of 19 and after struggling for five years to have a child, her son was born. By the time she was 20, her parents had died. Then tragedy struck again.

"In 2002, I was diagnosed with meningitis. I was incapacitated for almost three months. At the time my son was 5 years old. The morphine they gave me put me into a coma for four days and on life support."

Family support and her faith in God pulled her through.

"Two months later, my husband, unable to deal with the death of both his parents, committed suicide. I was left with a 5-year-old, at the stage when my career was just starting and house renovation and hospital bills had piled up."

Yet tragedy struck again – when Govender was suddenly retrenched. She slipped into a deep depression, but her son gave her the courage to pick herself up.



LA Consulting Engineers technical director Alan Wright, left, operations director Gordon Hutton, seated, and managing director Vino Govender.

# Tomboy dons heels and reaches the top

"For an entire year I lay in bed unable to face a new tomorrow. But every day when I opened my eyes, I saw another pair stare right back at me and I realised I had a purpose and needed to fulfil that."

Deon, who is the light of her life, has been her deepest inspiration, spurring her to succeed and reach greater heights. Govender soon found another job at an accounting firm, but when an opportunity came up to join LA Consulting Engineers as an admin clerk 10 years ago, she made the move and never looked back.

"I was sitting in a board meeting, taking notes one day, with the seven partners in a strategy meeting. The managing director went around the table, asking us: 'Where do you see yourself in the future?' He asked me, cynically as a sidestep, and I said: 'I will be bold and say I want to see myself as the MD. I laughed, but here I am."

"I was surrounded by all-white male partner-shareholders who were my seniors."

Over the years she came to count these men among her partners, mentors and equals.

"I knew at that point where I wanted to be, in an industry which women, particularly Indian women, knew little about it. From that day, I strived to achieve that goal. I became passionate and worked long hours to fulfil that dream," she said.

Govender said she struggled to achieve a work-life balance. She would fetch her son from school and he would sit in her office while she worked. She would help him with homework, then take

### CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Margaret Hirsch Finalist and Business Woman Achiever Award of the Month 2015.
- Finalist in the Corporate Category for Business Women's Association Business Women Achiever Awards 2015.
- Standard Bank Top Women Awards Finalist 2015.
- National Business Awards Top Performing Entrepreneur 2016.
- Margaret Hirsch Business Woman Achiever of the Year 2016.

him home before doing her second shift until late at night.

Promotions to financial manager, associate and financial director and, eventually, managing director and majority shareholder followed. She believes that as a woman, she had to work twice as hard to prove herself.

Business in the built environment began to shrink in 2010-11 amid a global recession, but her hard work paid off and her dream came true when the shareholders decided to refocus and rebrand, placing her at the helm. She had long since proved her financial and accounting skills and had run the company's social investment projects successfully.

Changes under her leadership include the rebranding, the retention of existing clients while adding new ones, the formulation of a five-year strategic plan, the implementation of austerity measures to cut operating costs by a quarter and the maintenance of an 18-month forward-order book – an ambitious endeavour in tough financial times.

Govender said the firm

implemented a new business management system and achieved ISO 9001 certification last year.

"With all these changes, the company is well positioned over the medium to long term to tap into and be part of the government's National Development Plan. It can contribute significantly to the economy, help solve some of the country's socio-economic challenges," Govender said.

But she worries about red tape hampering business growth.

"In the built environment, they (the government) are always moving the goal posts with new legislation, almost like a knee-jerk reaction to issues experienced."

"There is a need to help SMMEs develop and encourage sustainable solutions that would enable them to provide jobs and support families."

She is also concerned that the average engineer is around 62 years old and is on the verge of retiring. She is involved in five mentorship programmes with emerging entrepreneurs, helping them navigate the bureaucracy in

the sector, but believes more needs to be done to help small businesses and engineering graduates who lack practical experience.

Govender is no queen bee and believes in doing whatever she can to empower her staff, especially women.

"To me, my staff are not just a number. They form an integral part of my life and my business. Each staff member is treated as an individual, each with his or her own needs. I assist with their journey to ensure they follow their career paths," she said.

When she is not crunching numbers, devising strategies and reaching out to the needy, she can be found reading an inspirational book such as *Today I Will*, by James Downton Jr, or *The Strength of Women*, edited by Angela Joshi.

On weekends, she sometimes enjoys a round of golf at the Durban Country Club with her son.

She took up golf not for business networking but because Deon had wanted to play from the age of 7.

It's a fitting pastime for this well-groomed achiever who admits she is secretly a tomboy.

"We women always say men put you down. For me, they lifted me up. There was a stage when I was very tomboyish. I never used to wear heels and dresses and the guys in the office actually trained me to do that."

Of course, her outward transformation was all her own idea, she says, just as it was her dream to climb to the top to be with the boys.

**GOVENDER'S  
TOP TIPS FOR  
EMERGING  
ENTREPRENEURS**

- Compliance is key in business, so make sure you get help and know how to correctly navigate the red tape.
- Always maintain your integrity and ethics – don't be tempted by bribery and corruption to secure a deal, because in the end you will lose everything.
- Take the advice of professionals in your business network seriously as you are never too old to learn.
- Optimise your money management and budgeting skills.
- When you land your first major deal, take advice on how to manage your cash flow and don't be tempted to blow the budget on immediately upgrading your business or buying new vehicles.



LEFT: Another mountain to climb... LA Consulting engineers' managing director Vino Govender lets her hair down in her "tomboy" mode.

INSET: Enjoying a round of golf, a game her son encouraged her to play.

BELOW: Govender gives richly of her time and resources.

# SHARING LOVE, CHANGING LIVES

**LYSE COMINS**

WHEN Vino Govender is not working, she can be found living her dream, changing lives by sharing love and hope with the elderly, orphans, widows and distressed teenagers.

Despite her busy schedule as an executive and single mother, Govender finds time to assist the needy in her personal capacity, through non-profit organisation Usizo Empowerment, which she founded two years ago, and through LA Consulting Engineers' corporate social investment programme.

The company's pay-off line "Life Africa – Changing Lives" speaks to the team's passion about ensuring sustainable development and having a real impact on communities in which it operates by providing continuous advice and services.

"I work closely with Reach For A Dream, helping children fighting life-threatening diseases.

I volunteer my time to help the organisation fulfil their dreams. 'Dreams' are sponsored by the firm," she said.

Govender said one recent project involved kitting out a previously disadvantaged young soccer team with boots and uniforms.

A project close to her heart is the company's LAV Hamper initiative, which sees between 30 and 50 food hampers distributed to needy families, including the elderly and widows who struggle to survive on state pensions, every month.

She hopes to get this number up to 300 in the next few years.

Govender heads the project and is personally involved in arranging the packs and physically driving to the families to distribute the grocery parcels.

She also works closely with Usizo Empowerment to provide trauma counselling and support for teenagers.

At present she is working

with youth in Inanda who are struggling with peer pressure, teenage suicide, drugs and domestic problems. The focus is on uplifting the local community.

"We get the youth into projects that let them focus on something besides themselves. We are revamping a local orphanage, so we meet there monthly to discuss the project and any issues they have," she said.

Govender also has a group of volunteers that touches the lives of the elderly in old age homes, where she loves to share the love she has not been able to give back to her parents after losing them at such a young age.

"I help retired men and women feel good about themselves, by providing special 'pamper days' on Mother's Day and Father's Day and other special occasions.

"We spend the day at the old age home offering hand and foot manicures and massages.

"I am constantly creating love for other people," said Govender.

