

FIVE YOUNG VOICES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN FORESTRY

This Youth Day, FSA invited South Africa's forestry students to share their stories through the #SAForestryYouth Instagram competition. The response was both inspiring and a powerful reminder that the next generation is arriving fuelled by unbridled enthusiasm and passion for the Forestry Sector.

MEET THE NEXT GENERATION

There is a quiet revolution happening in South African forestry, and it looks like this: a young woman from a rural KwaZulu-Natal community who grew up watching her mother work the plantations and who is now planting her own future in silviculture. A young man who grew up beside the plantations of a small village and discovered that sustainable forest management was where science met soul. And a student who opened her university admission letter expecting to read "Forensic Science" and whose life changed completely when he found "Forestry" instead.

These are just some of the stories from a generation who have discovered forestry on their own terms, and they are enthusiastic about what they have found.

SENAMILE AMAHLE BHENGU DIPLOMA IN FORESTRY, NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY (GEORGE CAMPUS) | YEAR 2

Senamile's path into forestry was shaped by community and a pivotal moment at a Sappi careers expo in 2022. Hearing Noncedo Ngubane, a woman from her own community, a fellow alumna of Mpolweni Secondary School, speak about her forestry career was transformative. "Seeing someone with a similar background succeed gave me the confidence to believe in myself," she says.

Now completing her experiential training with Siyanqoba Forestry Solutions in Howick, where she planted with semi-mechanised machinery for the first time and helped rehabilitate land damaged by the 2024 Gilboa Farm wildfire. Senamile has experienced forestry at its most real, firefighting after a prescribed burn spread faster than expected. Of that moment, she reflects: "This experience taught me the importance of teamwork, quick decision-making and following safe firefighting procedures."

Her ambition is to specialise in silviculture and to give something back. "I hope to give back



to communities by creating awareness about the importance of forests," she says. "Forests play a vital role in conserving biodiversity, protecting water resources and reducing carbon dioxide through carbon sequestration." Raised by a single mother who worked in forestry without the opportunity to study, Senamile carries that legacy forward with intention: "Through my education, I feel I am carrying her dream forward while creating my own."

**SIYABONGA KEVIN
MOKOENA
DIPLOMA IN FORESTRY,
NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY
(GEORGE CAMPUS) | YEAR 3
(FINAL YEAR)**

Siyabonga grew up in a small village surrounded by plantations, so for him, forestry was not an abstract career choice; it was the landscape he came from. "I appreciate how the trees contribute to the environment," he says.

His experiential training at MTO North confirmed what he had begun to understand in the classroom, that forestry is more than timber production, it is an intricate system balancing mechanisation, science, conservation and people. "I was surprised by how much knowledge on mechanised machines was given to us, only to be then exposed to more than 50% of semi-mechanised operations," he reflects, a lesson in humility that the industry extends well beyond its equipment.

Siyabonga hopes to work in fire management on graduation, contributing to protection practices that safeguard both people and plantation. I want more people to realise that "forestry is not just about cutting trees" he says. "It is about sustainability, conservation and supporting livelihoods. It is an intricate system that requires a deep understanding of how trees behave under certain conditions and how to adapt to different changes and impacts."



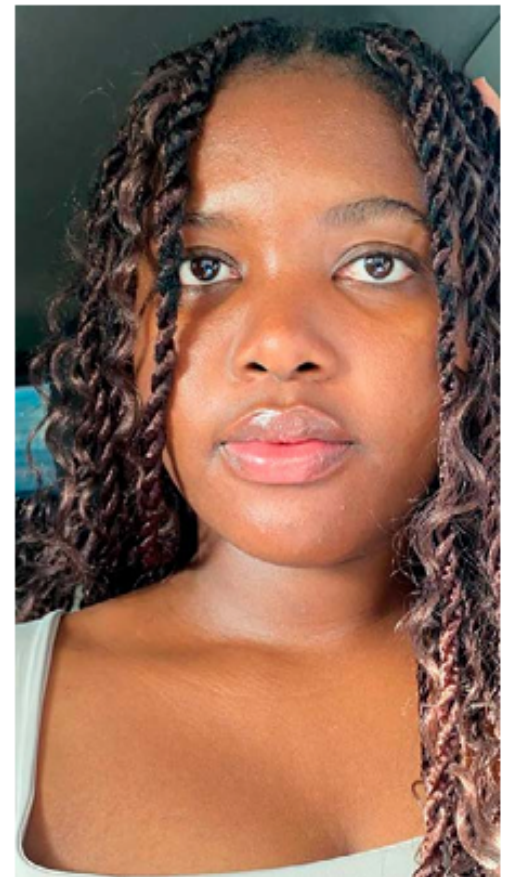
**SURPRISE NDLOVU
BSC FORESTRY, UNIVERSITY OF
MPUMALANGA | YEAR 3**

Of all the origin stories in this cohort, Surprise Ndlovu's may be the most memorable. She applied to university believing she had chosen Forensic Science, but when her admission letter arrived, it read: Bachelor of Science in Forestry. "Forestry? When did I apply for forestry?" she laughs. But as Surprise explains, curiosity won "those few minutes of research changed everything."

Looking back, the journey makes perfect sense. As a schoolgirl, Surprise was repeatedly selected for environmental and biodiversity camps in Sabie, where she was exposed to forests, conservation and wildlife. Her church life took

her hiking and camping. "Without even knowing it, I was falling in love with the very environment that forestry is built around." Surprise is drawn to the field's technological dimension, the innovative engineering and remote sensing that is shaping forestry and sees the industry as anything but outdated. "Forestry today involves drones, satellite data, GIS, remote sensing, advanced machinery and scientific research. It is a field where technology, environmental management and problem-solving come together."

Her advice to young people, "sometimes the career you never planned for turns out to be exactly where you are meant to be."



RETHABILE NKHAPHE FORESTRY, NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY | YEAR 1

For Rethabile Nkhaphe, forestry is rooted in a passion for nature, sustainability and opening doors for communities who may not yet know the Sector exists. Coming from a small town in the Free State where forests of any sort are rare, she was drawn to the idea of bringing forestry programmes and opportunities to people who are unfamiliar with them.

Now a first-year student at Nelson Mandela University, Rethabile has found forestry to be broader than expected. She was surprised to encounter forestry engineering and inspired by how the field connects planting, soil, climate and sustainability. Silviculture has been a particular highlight, especially learning how soil can act as a carbon sink and help reduce the impacts of global warming.

Her interest lies especially in the conservation and outdoor sides of forestry, where hands-on work helps protect land and natural resources. A fire management field trip also left a lasting impression, showing her how fire can affect forests and soil in both harmful and beneficial ways.

Looking ahead, Rethabile hopes to become a forestry research scientist, exploring the impact forestry has on climate and finding new ways to improve environmental outcomes. Her advice to anyone considering the field is heartfelt, "pour yourself into it, because forestry is about believing in the green economy and choosing to fight for the future".



MSIZI KHANYILE BSC FORESTRY, SPRINGFIELD RESEARCH UNIVERSITY | YEAR 2

Msizi Khanyile, provides an international perspective. For him, forestry brings together his passion for the environment, his interest in science and technology and his desire to make a positive contribution to the future. Now in his second year of a BSc Forestry at Springfield Research University, Eswatini, he says his choice was shaped by a concern for climate change and a belief that forests play a vital role in supporting people, wildlife and the planet.

What has surprised him most is how broad the Sector is. Forestry, he has discovered, is not only about planting trees; it also involves economics, engineering, technology, biodiversity, climate change and community development. His favourite parts of the course so far have been

silviculture and forest engineering, where science meets practical fieldwork.

Msizi is especially drawn to the way modern technology is transforming forestry. He hopes to work in forest planning and management, using tools such as GIS, remote sensing and digital mapping to monitor forest resources, support better decision-making and strengthen sustainable forest management.

His message to young people is clear, "if you enjoy nature, science, problem-solving and making a positive difference, forestry is an excellent career". It is, he says, "a modern sector that uses drones, GIS, remote sensing and research to solve real-world environmental challenges while helping to build a more sustainable future".



