



MAKING WAVES: Xoliswa Bekiswa is one of the country's few black marine pilots.

Rural pilot guides the world's largest vessel

Sithandiwe Velaphi

A YOUNG woman from rural parts of the province is literally making waves.

Xoliswa Bekiswa from Zimbane in Mthatha is one of few marine pilots in the country. Recently she made news as she had the privilege of guiding one of the biggest vessels on the planet, the MSC Sola, to Africa's deepest port, the Port of Ngqura in Port Elizabeth.

Built in 2008, MSC Sola is longer than three and a half rugby pitches (364 metres long, 45.6m wide and 15.5m deep) with an impressive gross tonnage of 131 771 and a slot capacity of 11 660 TEU (20-foot containers), with connections for 960 refrigerated containers (reefers).

Bekiswa admitted that although it was her day to day job to guide ships, she was a little nervous when guiding MSC Sola.

"MSC Sola was bigger and longer. I was a little nervous though because of the hype and excitement that surrounded the event but it was a great experience," she said. Bekiswa recently became the fourth black female marine pilot to obtain an open licence in South Africa, which

allows her to help navigate vessels of any size and type into South African waters.

On being one of the few black marine pilots, she said: "I feel privileged and blessed."

Bekiswa said she entered the marine industry by chance.

"I did not even know about it before. I met my career when we went to the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 2009. I was in Grade 11 at Zingisa Comprehensive High in Mthatha. On our way out on the last day of the festival, we met a guy by the name of Simphiwe Mavela and he had these pictures with ships and containers.

"We were passing him when he called because we were in a rush as we were leaving for home and the teachers had given us limited time. He called us and started explaining and I liked it. So I went and did my research and applied at the then Natal Technikon (now Durban University of Technology)," said Bekiswa.

It was one of her greatest achievements both personally and professionally.

Meanwhile, MSC Sola has since left Port Elizabeth for the Far East.

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