



LEFT: Nompumelelo with her late mom, Nonhlanhla, who inspired her to aim high. ABOVE LEFT: She was part of the inaugural class at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls. ABOVE RIGHT: With beloved gran Vivian, who raised her.

“My mom gave me a hug, wiped away the tears and told me not to be afraid because I’d turn out different. She asked of me to make better decisions than she had and to work hard.”

Almost 18 months later Nonhlanhla died of Aids, leaving Nompumelelo in the care of her grandmother Vivian (now 72).

With her mother’s words etched in her memory Nompumelelo threw herself into her schoolwork. “Even though my mom’s passing was difficult it made me stronger. I never dwelt on my loss but instead immersed myself in school,” she says.

When she was in Grade 7 her teachers encouraged her to apply to the school Oprah was building. What followed was a rigorous application process consisting of interviews, grammar, maths and aptitude tests as well as essay writing.

The final interview was held at St John’s College in Joburg and when Nompumelelo arrived she couldn’t believe her eyes. “I walked in and saw Oprah Winfrey sitting with [her best friend] Gayle King by her side. I couldn’t even think!” she says. Oprah gave her a hug and sat her down.

When asked to recount the most difficult thing she’d overcome Nompumelelo talked about the loss of her mother.

In 2007 she was among 72 girls chosen to attend Oprah’s elite school.

“I felt so honoured to have been given the opportunity of being taught at the academy. Sometimes I found it challenging but we were also nurtured and groomed. That school changed my life.”

During her time there she learnt almost as much from her failures as her successes. She was bitterly disappointed when she missed out on a US university tour – 25 girls were selected on the basis of their grades but Nompumelelo wasn’t among them because her maths and science marks weren’t good enough.

But it turned out to be a pivotal moment, inspiring her to work even harder. From being an average student she blossomed

into an excellent one who matriculated with five distinctions in 2011.

**I**N JUNE 2012 Nompumelelo arrived at Johnson C Smith University on a full scholarship. Initially she enrolled as a visual and performance arts student but switched to politics and later interdisciplinary studies.

“I focused on global outreach public leadership and strategic communications and took a special interest in studying women in politics and business. What I loved about this degree was that it combined all the things I loved; I could be an artist, a politician and do communications all in one,” she says.

For her thesis Nompumelelo published a journal, *The Power Of Narrative For Oppressed African Women*, sharing her experiences as an Aids orphan and showing how the sharing of stories can help others. For her efforts she was awarded the top mark in her class and graduated magna cum laude.

Back in 2010 while in Grade 11 she gave her first motivational speech at an Aids conference and loved public speaking so much she was keen to do more.

“My gift is to speak. When I’m on stage I come alive,” she says.

She recalls the first time she was approached to speak publicly and was asked how much she’d charge. “I consulted Oprah and she advised me. I personally thought the amount was too much but she told me that if people really wanted me they’d pay.”

These days Nompumelelo is a sought-after speaker who’s given talks throughout the US, Canada and SA. The highlight of her speaking career occurred in June 2014 when she spoke on the same stage as O.

“She gave the keynote

address and I just remember being so overwhelmed when I saw my name on the programme alongside hers.” But in the end Nompumelelo so impressed the audience they gave her a standing ovation.

So what is it like having an open line to Oprah? “She’s Mom to me,” Nompumelelo says. “She’s an open person who empowers you to be yourself. Nothing is off limits so I can talk to her about anything, from school to break-ups. She’s rooted in the truth of who she is and when you’re in her presence you want to be more than you are. She’s funny but brutally honest.”

In December Nompumelelo was invited to spend a month with Oprah and Stedman (65) in Hawaii. “It was great; we’d go for hikes and I spent time following Stedman around while he worked.”

This month she’s due to enrol at High Point University in North Carolina on a full presidential scholarship to do her master’s degree in strategic communications. When she graduates Nompumelelo plans to return home to set up her own public relations agency.

“I want to serve my country because I owe my success to it,” she says. “My identity as a South African is the reason I get invited to give the talks I do and I want to honour that. I want to come back to the country that’s given so much to me.”

Words that must surely make Oprah extremely proud. ■

**‘My gift is to speak. When I’m on stage I come alive’**

She’s found her calling as a motivational speaker and has given talks in various countries.

