

1. Local champions in Namaqualand



Each year a splendid tapestry unfolds across the Namaqualand landscape – a diversity of flora overcome the harsh semi-arid conditions to grow and show their true colours to the world. Like these indigenous flowers, Priscilla Magerman – a Senior People and Conservation Practitioner at the Namaqua National Park – has spent her entire life in Namaqualand and much of her youth facing a myriad of challenges.

Overcoming these odds has not been easy, but with a little help from SKEP, which provided her with an opportunity to grow and learn, Magerman has today developed into an inspirational, vibrant force in the region. Magerman, who grew up in the town of Hondeklip Bay, says her community like many others in the region has for many years been afflicted by poverty and a lack of opportunities. "There are today few employment opportunities and I too felt this as a young person in this town. When you sit in a small town with no opportunities it is easy to get stuck. With the lack of opportunities, there are lots of social problems in the region – unemployment stands at more than 70%, alcohol abuse is a problem as is drug use, and many young girls are also falling pregnant. Many of our youth simply don't have the opportunity to find a path."

Magerman could have easily become one of those young people, but thanks to her desire to learn and make a difference she has triumphed to become an inspiration to her community. "It was in 2002, when I was in my early twenties, that I learnt about conservation projects and was given an opportunity to work on a handful of new research initiatives in the area. At the time I didn't know anything about conservation or national parks – I did have a love of the outdoors and the landscape here, but never at all thought that there was a career that could grow from this," she says.

One of the first projects she had the chance to work on was SKEP and she was recruited by Conservation International as a champion's assistant during the initiative's foundation phase. "During the SKEP work I got a real eye-opener on the environment around me and about conservation. I had the opportunity to learn and travel, to see the big picture of what is happening in the region and meet a lot of people. Working on SKEP expanded my horizons hugely and opened doors to possibilities I had not even dreamt of.

One of these doors came in the form of SANParks who recognised her talents and gave her a one year contract to join them in 2003 as a Social Ecologist at the Namaqua National Park. The contract was renewed for two years after that and by 2007 she had become a permanent employee as a Conservation Officer – the position she currently holds. "I have developed a passion for conservation – it has become a deep way to express my love of the landscape here," she says. Uplifting her community and the other communities of the region is also a key priority for Magerman. She has five key elements to her role – economic empowerment, environmental education, youth development, community facilitation and cultural heritage management – and much of her time is spent in communities doing the work that fulfils both her work duties and her personal goals. She is optimistic about the future of the region and that development challenges can be overcome.

"There is still much to be done to develop the Namaqua Park and there will be a lot of opportunities in the future for people in this area. What is exciting is that we have just added another 38 000 hectares given to us by De Beers – bringing the size to around 144 000 hectares – currently South Africa's fifth largest national park. People will have many more opportunities to make something of themselves, including through the growing tourism industry".