

Willing & Abel podcast: Achieving change from the ground up with politician and activist Mbali Ntuli

[00:00:00] **Mbali Ntuli:** That's why I'm excited about what we see happening right now in our country. We have new political entrants. There's clearly a feeling in the country that not everyone's satisfied with the status quo and people are putting their hands up. And I'm always for helping new entrants and saying, I know how hard it is to be in that particular role.

[00:00:19] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so I applaud them for their bravery and we must lend our hands to them. Even if somebody doesn't necessarily want to be a parliamentarian or a councillor, you know, there's so many other ways to get involved, volunteer your time, donate. And I really think we need that culture in South Africa.

[00:00:35] **Mike Abel:** Hi. I'm Mike Abel.

[00:00:37] **Mike Abel:** I'm a business marketing and communication specialist and the founder of M&C Saatchi Abel. I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist, an optimist at heart. Welcome to my podcast, Willing & Abel. The home of hopeful conversations that challenge perspectives. It's a continuation of the ideas and conversations I began in my book, Willing and Abel, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis.

[00:01:03] **Mike Abel:** My guest today is public speaker, entrepreneur, and activist Mbali Ntuli. Mbali spent 15 years as a DA counsellor. and filled roles such as youth leader and member of the provincial legislature for KZN and even contested the party leadership nationally before becoming founder and CEO of Ground Work Collective, a community development initiative.

[00:01:30] **Mike Abel:** So great to have you here today, Mbali.

[00:01:32] **Mbali Ntuli:** Thank you so much for having me, Mike. It's always great to see you.

[00:01:35] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, we're going to have a wonderful conversation over the next 60 minutes or so.

[00:01:40] **Mbali Ntuli:** Looking forward to it.

[00:01:41] **Mike Abel:** To the average person who has just heard my introduction, it might be surprising to know that you are also in the taxi business.

[00:01:49] **Mike Abel:** Funny enough, I actually also worked a little bit in the taxi business. Really? In the eighties? Yeah. With, uh, Uncedo in the Eastern Cape. Okay. In Motherwell, Zwide, Kwazakele. So let's talk to Mbali, the taxi owner. What have you learned through this and what lessons have you carried into other areas of your life?

[00:02:07] **Mbali Ntuli:** Well, let me maybe just take you back a little bit into how I got into the taxi industry.

[00:02:11] **Mbali Ntuli:** So obviously my dad was born during apartheid. There wasn't many means of economic prosperity for black people. And he used to drive a little taxi. And back in those days, it was sort of these little car-like taxi things. And what he figured out was that a lot of people needed to get into rural areas and township areas, and the municipal buses of the sort that were available at the time just didn't do it.

[00:02:35] **Mbali Ntuli:** And he found himself a niche, particularly in Northern KZN, of being able to get into these areas. And it grew into a business. And he became the first person along with Simon Gcaba to fund the taxi association. And the first of its kind really in South Africa. And that was, you know, probably one of the few ways that black people at that time could really accumulate wealth, which also came obviously with a lot of violence and a lot of buying for positions.

[00:03:01] **Mbali Ntuli:** But essentially my family was one of two in the whole province that had access to any routes and then were able to codify many of the rules that at that time were what the taxi industry were, and some of them were great, you know. They had a proper widows' fund because they understood generational wealth and that if people died, you needed someone to be able to still maintain their family.

[00:03:21] **Mbali Ntuli:** So they had that, they would give to communities and teachers and really try to, I think, in their version of the way of looking at the world, you know, uplift black communities in a way that society and certainly the government wasn't doing at the time. And they felt very, very strongly that it needed to be something that stayed in families.

[00:03:40] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so that's why for a long time, and I think KZN might be one of the few provinces that still does it, taxi routes passed on into the family. And so that's how I entered into the taxi business. So my father died when I was eight, the same year Simon Gcaba also died and it left a huge vacuum in the taxi industry in KZN.

[00:03:58] **Mbali Ntuli:** '96s started the big taxi wars, and this is also just after democracy. So a lot of people that were in exile and political parties came back. Their only real skills were, you know, being people that could use guns. So a lot of them became hitmen. And this is where you get the amalgamation of the hitmen (iNkabi's) in the taxi industry.

[00:04:16] **Mbali Ntuli:** Anyway, long story short. When I was of age, because my mother took over the business and it was very tough for her because obviously she had a target on her back and she was one of the first females to get in there. But she

kept the business alive until my brother and I were old enough. And then she passed on two taxis to us to then be able to run.

[00:04:35] **Mbali Ntuli:** And we have those routes because our father had started those routes. And I think for me, what I learned just watching all of this happen, I mean, there was lots of violence, assassinations on our lives all the time. We had to go to boarding school. We had bodyguards, was two things that I think are important.

[00:04:52] **Mbali Ntuli:** Power's never ever given. You have to take it and you have to also not be afraid of conflict. And I think those two things have been very important also in my political career, but also in life, because I just, I'm not really afraid of anything. I think after the trauma of everything I've seen and just seeing the worst and best of people in the taxi industry, you get both.

[00:05:14] **Mbali Ntuli:** For me, I think the lessons that I carry with me is to never assume that people are just going to make space and make a way for you. And that if you want to do something, if you believe in it, you have to go for it and you need to do it and back yourself essentially. No one's just going to step away and do it for you.

[00:05:32] **Mbali Ntuli:** And then with that is also, you know, conflict. To not be afraid of it and to not always view it as something that is, you know, binary, it's being able to deal with conflicts is not something that means that you always want to engage in violence, but sometimes it's also the way to really establish boundaries for people and there's no better place that teaches you that than the taxi industry.

[00:05:53] **Mbali Ntuli:** So, a very interesting part of my life. I've stepped away from it a little bit now that I'm a mum. It's just very intensive. You need to be fully hands on all the time. And I really want to focus on my family. So with everything I've got going on, I've stepped away a little bit. I still help my mum here and there. But I'll get back to it when my children are a little bit older.

[00:06:11] **Mike Abel:** So your mum and your brother are still very much involved in driving the family business, if you like.

[00:06:18] **Mbali Ntuli:** They are, but you know, my mum is, she's just so incredible. She also allowed my brother when I stepped away to also just go and pursue more of what he wants to.

[00:06:27] **Mbali Ntuli:** And he's very business-minded and orientated. So he wanted to move to Johannesburg to figure out some business on his own. So even he's kind of stepped away, which unfortunately has left it to my poor mum to still continue. But I think she also enjoys it. I think it's the kind of industry where it's very hard to step out of it because you do need to be hands-on, you need to be watching all the time.

[00:06:47] **Mike Abel:** How old is your mum, by the way?

[00:06:49] **Mbali Ntuli:** She turned 60 this year. Okay, so she's still young. She is, although she loves to pretend that she's very old.

[00:06:55] **Mike Abel:** Because she's a gogo, no?

[00:06:56] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah, because she's a Gogo. Yeah, she loves to pretend she's old. But no, she's 60 and she's still very, very full of life and just a mum, always.

[00:07:06] **Mbali Ntuli:** When I was coming here today, she was telling me to make sure that I've combed my hair and I don't embarrass her, so...

[00:07:12] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think that she needs to know that her daughter is one of the best-groomed people I've ever met. Who always looks a billion dollars every time I see her. Can pass that message, well she'll hear the podcast, I'm sure.

[00:07:23] **Mike Abel:** And Mbali, it's very interesting what you said about conflict. Because I think that that's something incredibly valuable for you and I to talk about a little bit. Because really what we want to do is to, I guess, in part useful wisdoms and insights. And I think in society today, people don't really know how to deal with conflict in so many ways where they conflate or confuse the what with the how.

[00:07:48] **Mike Abel:** So if they disagree with somebody, they feel uncomfortable. And so the manifestation of that disagreement is anger.

[00:07:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah.

[00:07:55] **Mike Abel:** So if I don't agree with your opinion, instead of saying, you know what, I actually don't see it your way. We get cross and we say, you are wrong. We don't often come at it from our own place of comfort, our own place of values, whatever it might be in terms of handling conflict.

[00:08:12] **Mike Abel:** What are the lessons that you've learned in terms of effectively managing it?

[00:08:17] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think the self-awareness is quite important because you also then don't take everything personally and you can be okay with people actually disagreeing with you and that not being a conflict that has to get to the final stages of a major showdown or to see someone as your enemy just because they disagree with you.

[00:08:33] **Mbali Ntuli:** For me, particularly in my political career, I think that was one of the things that I really grappled with not understanding why everyone wasn't like that. So you would disagree with someone sometimes, you know, somebody who was considered senior to you and I suppose naively thinking that they would take it

as being constructive and being something that would be the betterment for either the organization or the particular plan that was having.

[00:08:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** But what I really realized is that people, to your point, who have their own stories or whatever it is, internally, don't always see disagreement in that way and find it to be a conflict that must be, you know, a zero-sum game of, now we are enemies because we disagree. And it took me a long time to realize that that was really mainly because of the insecurities because what you end up doing is constantly trying to explain what you mean, why you think this is.

[00:09:21] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so I think, you know, um, probably for me, I've always been comfortable with conflict. I've always been able to stand up for what I believe and be fine with people not liking that or people not agreeing with me and not taking it personally and being able to really be fine with the person the next day.

[00:09:39] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I suppose this goes all the way to me being young and standing up for bullies or standing up to bullies when I saw them doing that with people. And that's always been, I think, a big part of just who I am. That's why I think I went into the work that I did and why I continue to do what I do now.

[00:09:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** I like to stand up for people that don't have voices. I feel like a big part of what life has given me is the ability to do that. And that's something that I should give back to those who aren't able to. And so if that means that sometimes I have to be in conflict with people, then I'm okay with that. But I know that it's never about being personal.

[00:10:12] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I know it's never about trying to hurt someone or to, you know, damage them. It's really about trying to get to a solution, but I'm also very comfortable if somebody's not happy with me and I can live very easy with that. As long as I feel like I've done what I feel is right and principled, I'll sleep just fine at night.

[00:10:31] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Many years ago, and I might've reflected actually, in it, in one of the previous podcasts where a friend of mine asked me a question when I was discussing something with him. He said to me, Mike, do you want to be liked, or do you want to be real?

[00:10:44] **Mbali Ntuli:** Hmm.

[00:10:45] **Mike Abel:** And there's nothing worse than being liked for not being real because then you're not really liked.

[00:10:49] **Mike Abel:** They're liking some version of you, not you in and of itself. So I think a big part of the journey is to embrace conflict. To feel comfortable with conflict, but at the same time to not, I guess, seek out conflict.

[00:11:05] **Mbali Ntuli:** A hundred percent.

[00:11:06] **Mike Abel:** You know...

[00:11:06] **Mbali Ntuli:** And this is why I also just said, you know, at the beginning that self-awareness, I think, is an important aspect for how one deals with conflict.

[00:11:13] **Mbali Ntuli:** Because, obviously neither you or I are the kind of people who actively go seeking it, but if it comes, then we are comfortable to stand in it because I think we believe that our values and our principles will hold us in good stead about how we deal with it. And I don't think a lot of people sometimes have that.

[00:11:29] **Mbali Ntuli:** Certainly in my career, I didn't experience that. I've found people that would lash out, that would have the deep insecurities that play into the conflict and would end up being incredibly messy and toxic in many ways, but I think it was much worse for them internally than they realized. Yeah, so I think successful conflict resolution also requires a great degree of self-awareness

[00:11:54] **Mike Abel:** And the ability to, as you correctly say, understand what you've done.

[00:11:58] **Mike Abel:** And if you feel that you have erred to make good on that, because a lot of people, when they feel that they've done something wrong or feel guilty about something, it often manifests in even worse behaviour to somebody because they feel they've wronged them, you know, which is a, I guess, a mystery in and of itself.

[00:12:17] **Mike Abel:** So politics, because it's a very, very interesting career choice, you know, very few people I know have gone, well, I know quite a lot of politicians. I was about to say, I'm sure you know a lot. But by and large, when you think about careers, very few people choose a career in politics. And it's a very brutal career by what I've seen.

[00:12:37] **Mike Abel:** And I'm amazed how many thin-skinned people go into politics because they're happy to dish it out, but they're not very good at taking it, is one of the observations I've made. What led you into politics? What was it about it that, I mean, I know we've heard already that you like to rescue and save people, whether they want it or not.

[00:12:55] **Mike Abel:** But what led you to politics?

[00:12:57] **Mbali Ntuli:** So this is one of these questions that I still ponder about for myself, because was it innate that I was just someone who was really interested in politics? I certainly was from a young age and I have a lot of relatives and my mum who recount that, and I remember quite distinctly being young and meeting the

Queen when I was seven, I'd won a competition and she was coming to South Africa for the first time in a long time to meet her.

[00:13:21] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I understood the concept of what she kind of did and I didn't know I was a Republican then, so I just thought it was cool that you got to make up cool rules to help people and do stuff. But I think also, again, just to go back to the stories that shape us. When my dad died, we, at the time we were living in the suburb of La Lucia in Durban.

[00:13:39] **Mbali Ntuli:** We were one of the first black families that were there. And culturally, in my culture, if somebody passes away, we slaughter a cow and some animals.

[00:13:47] **Mike Abel:** Hmm.

[00:13:47] **Mbali Ntuli:** Where their home was. And so of course we had these cows in the suburbs of La Lucia and one of them got loose and started running around. So obviously all the white people in the neighbourhood were really shocked about that and it was a big, big drama and people were coming out and I mean, there was a really a little bit of tension in the area, but one of the things that I really do remember was that just after that, when the situation had calmed down, a man called Roger Burrows came to speak to my mum to ask her, you know, so uh, stuff about the cultural rights and what was this about and to really get a sense.

[00:14:18] **Mbali Ntuli:** And she spoke to him and we were in the living room too, and he was really kind. And this was in 1996. So I think just after the big sort of '94 euphoria and South Africa was figuring out its way of living together. I remember him coming back several times to check up on us and to check that we were integrating well into the community and to his credit and many of the people around us, they were really awesome.

[00:14:39] **Mbali Ntuli:** And to me, it seemed really great that you could have this person who was at the time the leader of the DP be humble enough to come to a small family and to make them feel welcome and to really use politics as well. And then he used a lot of the knowledge that my mum gave him to help write some of the bylaws around cultural rights, which, I mean, they still exist today in South Africa.

[00:14:58] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so, it's all these little stories that lead up to that. I suppose also the trauma of losing a father, seeing my mum having to struggle to find her place in the business, being taken away, going to boarding school, a sense of just feeling sometimes the injustice of not always being able to do things and wanting to always be in a position where I wouldn't feel that way anymore, whether for myself or anyone else, and then just a general love of history and the world and people. For me, that is what politics is. It's how the world and people integrate together and how that makes societies form. And so I was always a student of history. And I think for me, naturally, politics just was always what I really wanted to do.

[00:15:38] **Mbali Ntuli:** And again, because I haven't figured out for myself, whether. It was more personal or more, you know, also then having leadership roles, what eventually leads you to it. But at least by 12, I was telling people that I wanted to go into politics. And so that's what I thought I would do. And my politics at the time I thought would be some form of social activism more than it was straight politics.

[00:16:00] **Mbali Ntuli:** But by the time I got to university, I understood a bit more about who I was and the ideologies I thought I felt closely aligned with. And I remember this young girl at a computer lab pressing ctrl alt delete and she was pressing them individually while I was there to come and print something and I asked her what she was doing and she told me that she was trying to open the computer and this is how they told her and basically it turned out that she hadn't used a computer before and she was on the same level and competing with somebody like myself who had had one all her life and so I felt that that was quite unfair.

[00:16:34] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I mean, I'm fast forwarding this answer quite a bit, but I took it to go and speak to the student affairs person at that stage to figure out what we could do about this. When I got back to my res, I found that there were many people like that. And I thought that there was a great injustice of having them compete at the same sort of level.

[00:16:52] **Mbali Ntuli:** So one of the things that I did was to try and organize them. And I reached out to political parties to see who could help to really run this as an issue to make sure that we had some kind of way for people to meet together and then get help. And of course the ANC and the IFP, who, you know, had been great friends of my father and family for many years, thought I was a coconut and didn't take me seriously.

[00:17:13] **Mike Abel:** Really?

[00:17:14] **Mbali Ntuli:** And the first party, they're no longer, though. Now they love me. And the one party that actually was quite open was the DA. And so then after that, I interacted with the DA. I'd already, I think, figured that I was socially quite a liberal person. And yeah, from there I started the first DA's first student branch at Rhodes, which then went on to be the strongest branch.

[00:17:34] **Mbali Ntuli:** Okay, so this was at Rhodes University in, uh, Makhanda, in

[00:17:37] **Mike Abel:** Grahamstown. It is, yes, of course,

[00:17:39] **Mbali Ntuli:** because you're from the Eastern Cape. I am indeed. Yeah, proud Rhodes we have become. Yeah, I majored in tequila and politics.

[00:17:50] **Mike Abel:** No, I think I majored in Sambuca. I can still do a flaming Sambuca if you want me to.

[00:17:54] **Mbali Ntuli:** Oh, you're brave. So yeah, that was, that was my, my great journey, but I think just the amalgamation of a number of incidents, but I always felt that I wanted to be in the social space activism space.

[00:18:03] **Mike Abel:** And so, uh, no, cause it was interesting. Cause when you're talking about this gentleman, Roger, that would pop over to your house, I wondered because you said he was from the DP and whether he played any influence in leading you into the DA.

[00:18:15] **Mbali Ntuli:** So not at that stage at all, in fact, but what I think might've been happening subconsciously was also just not thinking that the DA was alien. And so when it came time for me to be able to join a political party, despite the fact that I knew and even had family members, you know, in the ANC and the IFP, my family was very close to King Zwelithini as well.

[00:18:36] **Mbali Ntuli:** Naturally, I think what I went towards, because it wasn't foreign to me, it was the DA because they were open to me because at that time, at least they were talking about being liberal, about a lot more things than, I think sadly they've turned out to be now, but so it felt like a great alignment and a great place to also be able to carve out a space for myself and between myself and a few other young people around the party at that particular time, we then in two years after that, we were able to convince the parties to have a youth congress that became its first chairperson, then its youth leader, the following congress with like a 99 percent vote.

[00:19:12] **Mbali Ntuli:** And for a while there we did great work. We put the DA on every single campus. We started great campaigns. We got the DA on Twitter, which maybe wasn't a good idea looking back now. And we had really funky, youth-focused campaigns. So that was, that was that. Yeah.

[00:19:29] **Mike Abel:** When you talk about the DA on Twitter, I always think of Phumzile van Damme and her being the keyboard warrior of the DA, until she left as well.

[00:19:38] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah. I think of somebody else, but they seem to be behaving now. Yeah.

[00:19:43] **Mike Abel:** Uh, okay. Yeah. Hopefully, hopefully they took the phone away from that particular person if we're thinking of the same lady. Yeah, it's very interesting. So if you were going to give any advice to somebody listening in here that's thinking of Politics, I guess, as a career, because, you know, you've now stepped out.

[00:20:03] **Mike Abel:** I have no doubt one day you'll step back in and maybe you'll be our president one day, please God. But what advice would you give them if somebody is listening? And that sounds cool. It sounds like a, because I think people have got the totally wrong idea, but let me say that of politics in South Africa,

because my understanding of you is you went into politics to serve and so many people go into politics to take and I don't know if politics today allows for serving. What is your thinking around that? What's your advice to somebody listening and thinking maybe politics?

[00:20:35] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think people should definitely go for it.

[00:20:37] **Mbali Ntuli:** I mean, as much as I'm out of formal representative politics now, there was no greater fulfillment than being able to do some of the incredible work that I got to do. So everything ranging from getting people who had never had IDs to get IDs, getting kids into school, helping to write legislative bills on sex offenders that stand till today to not be able to continue teaching children.

[00:20:58] **Mbali Ntuli:** There's a great amount that you can do even on the opposition ventures. And I think we need more patriotic South Africans that are ready to put their hands up. But I also understand why people didn't before. It's been such a dirty, dirty game with quite frankly, very low quality levels of representatives across the board.

[00:21:16] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so if you are a person who's got a really great career somewhere, but you want to serve your country, I could see why it would not be attractive. But that's why I'm excited about what we see happening right now in our country. We have new political entrants. There's clearly a feeling in the country that not everyone's satisfied with the status quo and people are putting their hands up.

[00:21:33] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I'm always for helping new entrants and saying, I know how hard it is to be in that particular role. And so I applaud them for their bravery and we must lend our hands to them, even if somebody doesn't necessarily want to be a parliamentarian or a councillor, you know, there's so many ways to get involved. Volunteer your time, donate. And I would really think that we would need that culture in South Africa. The best countries are the ones with the most active citizens, and I think have let that slide for the last 30 years.

[00:22:01] **Mbali Ntuli:** And we need to reset our country. And the only way is if we all get involved. So I encourage people, and this was a fun, is that a big element that people, that people don't realise. Part of this is really fun.

[00:22:12] **Mike Abel:** The only fun I ever see is the start of the state of the nation when the chaos ensues,

[00:22:20] **Mbali Ntuli:** people are pummelling each other.

[00:22:22] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. So it's a very interesting because. You know, when you look at the elections coming up, 29 May 2024, it seems to, to me like we are at a crossroads as a country right now, you know, there are new parties on the rise, there

are big established parties on the decline. It kind of feels to me like it's a turning point in many ways for the country.

[00:22:46] **Mike Abel:** One of my early guests in the podcast series was Songezo Zibi. Oh, yeah. Because it interested me how somebody had left a very successful corporate career. Who had no history like you in politics and no grounding in politics, but, you know, some people go, I guess, into the ministry when they have a calling and yet he had a calling to go into politics.

[00:23:08] **Mike Abel:** So I think I'd love to hear some of your perspectives, if you like, on what, how you see it playing out and nobody's gonna be holding you accountable, but no. Yeah. What are your fears? I'll throw the bones. You read them.

[00:23:23] **Mbali Ntuli:** Well, yeah. Just on, you know, Songezo Zibi and Rise, I think it's been very impressive how they've been able to have a professional organization. I don't think South Africans appreciate how difficult it is to start a party, to get volunteers, to do fundraising, even something that seems as simple as putting up posters is a hell of a lot of work. And so the fact that as a new entrant, even with these new laws, they've been able to get on there. I think that that's really great.

[00:23:48] **Mbali Ntuli:** And the other parties as well, you know, Action SA had a bit of a head start, but it's, it's great. I love these elections. I think there's so many things up in the air. My feeling is that the ANC will be below 50%, but I don't think anywhere near the 35 percent we see, you know, people polling, I think more 47, 48, but psychologically, I think that's going to be huge for our country.

[00:24:11] **Mbali Ntuli:** It's going to be huge to have that shift and to finally get people galvanized into believing that, actually, their votes mean something and then really getting stuck in, in 2026 and 2029, which I think will be the real showdown. I think KZN is up for grabs right now. And living there, I can tell you that I'm extremely worried about what that potential coalition might look like.

[00:24:32] **Mbali Ntuli:** If the MK is focused enough to get on the ballots by getting all their signatures, I think there will be a Kingmaker. And I mean.

[00:24:39] **Mike Abel:** And how terrifying is that really?

[00:24:41] **Mbali Ntuli:** It is quite terrifying because actually, I haven't heard of anything that they've said that gives me any hope that there aren't going to be complete chaos.

[00:24:50] **Mbali Ntuli:** I mean, everything from saying that they want, you know, the LGBT community to be, I don't know, what did he say? He wants them to be locked up or whatever the case was. Yeah, there was some nonsensical thing.

[00:25:03] **Mike Abel:** That's in violation of our constitution.

[00:25:05] **Mbali Ntuli:** The other one is that single mothers must be sent to Robben Island.

[00:25:08] **Mbali Ntuli:** So I mean, they're not really trying to be a constitutional...

[00:25:13] **Mike Abel:** Single mothers? So are father's not involved in creating single mothers?

[00:25:15] **Mbali Ntuli:** I mean, these are the questions that we must ask, but I do get the sense in KZN in that people aren't even really interested about what their manifesto or what they're saying.

[00:25:23] **Mbali Ntuli:** They want is to want to have an alternative vote? And I think that case and GP might be lost to the ANC. Interesting times.

[00:25:31] **Bookstore:** Mike Abel's book, *Willing and Abel, Lessons From a Decade in crisis* captures the stories of clients and partners, and the wins, losses, and learnings through his eyes in a career spanning three decades. Whether you're looking for courage or inspiration, to learn what it takes to disrupt industries, or discover how to transform your company meaningfully and truly empower your people, you'll find it between these pages. You can listen to the audiobook on Audible, download it on your Kindle, order it online, or find it at your favourite bookstore.

[00:26:06] **Mike Abel:** Madiba said, may our choices reflect our hopes, not our fears. And it seems like a lot of these are reflecting our fears and not our hopes. So if people are, I guess, gravitating behind punishing single moms. Which is an aberration in and of itself, because so many mums in South Africa are single mums. And so many mums in South Africa don't intend to be single moms, but that's how their lives transpired because they've been let down by their partner in terms of women raising men in South Africa.

[00:26:38] **Mike Abel:** And I think the other tragedy around that is, uh, as you say in terms of not embracing people's sexual orientation, I think is, uh, disgraceful in 2024. And yet the world itself seems to be in a pretty mad place right now in Bali.

[00:26:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** It does. And we have what, the super election year with 70 elections around the world.

[00:26:59] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:27:00] **Mbali Ntuli:** I don't know. I'm, I'm quite an optimist. So for me, whenever I see a challenge, I think we must run towards it and do what we can do. So yeah, South Africa is not looking great. We've got some mad leaders across the political

spectrum, but what is also in our favour that we've got our young population who aren't historically super aligned to anyone.

[00:27:18] **Mbali Ntuli:** And if we just make sure that we get them to really understand what's at stake and how to use democracy, I think that they're going to be far smarter than the generations before us and how they choose who has their best interests at heart. And that's my hope. And that's why I do the work that I do now, because I feel like that's where our low-hanging fruit is as a nation.

[00:27:37] **Mbali Ntuli:** And we are gonna do it. And I know people feel gloomy and like we don't have time and we must get things done now. But that's when you actually become about tactics rather than strategy. And I think we've seen some political parties that have mushroomed up just, you know, to weaken the ANC or to go against the ANC.

[00:27:54] **Mbali Ntuli:** And that's not really long-term, right? We should really be having a culture shift and behaviour shift into thinking about what we want democracy to be and how we envision our country shaping up. So, there's a lot of work to do, and I think a lot of us are prepared to do it, and so I'm not super gloomy.

[00:28:12] **Mike Abel:** Well, like you, I also run towards the fire if I see one with my marshmallows because I like bright marshmallows, but when you look at the situation now and people making election choices, and we're going to cut to Ground Work Collective and why you started that and what you do there, uh, visa vis, uh, social change.

[00:28:31] **Mike Abel:** But if you had to say to a person listening in right now, this is how I would choose my political party because democracy is theoretical. Of course it's a lived thing and it's a practice thing and something that should be enshrined. But if you had to bring it down more to, uh, a tangible on-the-ground reason for voting for a party, what would you say to somebody in terms of how to assess who to vote for? Who affects their values?

[00:28:58] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah, so I look for a number of different things. I look for a cohort of leadership as opposed to one or a very strong personality type, cult sort of leadership.

[00:29:08] **Mike Abel:** In terms of old grootman leadership that used to exist in this country? Yeah. In any on the continent, well, around the world.

[00:29:14] **Mike Abel:** Maybe Around the world. Yeah.

[00:29:15] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think the, the time for the big man in politics is way over. Yeah. And particularly in a continent like ours.

[00:29:21] **Mike Abel:** Yeah.

[00:29:21] **Mbali Ntuli:** So I look to see that there's actually a collective of leadership because that. At least it makes me believe that there'll be a diversity of views around the table that reflect our very diverse society and that, that leadership is able to come from different backgrounds, places, and so it's diverse and it's makeup.

[00:29:38] **Mbali Ntuli:** And then I look for people that actually know what they're doing and have some level of professionalism and expertise in the field. And whatever it might be, you could be the best, you know, librarian or teacher, but there needs to be some of that. And that also includes people who might not have academic qualifications, but our people have been working in communities because in a lot of places, those are the people that are actually keeping our democracy alive because they step into often to do the work that the state has failed to do.

[00:30:03] **Mbali Ntuli:** So in my job in politics, I often meet, you know, the granny on the street who takes care of all the kids or the mama who's the one who's basically doing all the NGO work that should be done there. So those people are equally important to me in the party as the people that, you know, have economics and, or masters in economics.

[00:30:21] **Mbali Ntuli:** And then I also look for a party that has values for me that will give most of the people in our country the best opportunity to really self-actualise and to be what and who they want to be in life and that can take a variety of shapes and manifest everything from how they view growing the economy to what they believe a society should look like as a vision to even what they think should be almost a happiness or fun meter of what a society is like. I look for quirky things like that too, for myself. There's never going to be a party that's perfect or leader that's perfect. So I'm not expecting everything to be aligned, but I want a party that has strong constitutional values that will protect people's freedoms that will catch people who might not be having the best time in life, but most importantly, that seems to care about the people of South Africa.

[00:31:09] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think for me that is critically important because when you look at political parties around the world and closer to home, love, a care, commitment, and a passion for the citizenry often doesn't seem to be something that one can see manifesting. It seems to be career politicians that are earning big money.

[00:31:31] **Mike Abel:** Big pay cheques. You know, I'm always very amused and when I say amused and impressed by the blue light brigades and the way that politicians who are really civil servants who are really paid by us and our tax money somehow elevate themselves into being important people. Yeah. Yet, the people that are paying their salaries are unimportant people.

[00:31:53] **Mike Abel:** And that's not really an equation that I'm familiar with in a normal work life.

[00:31:57] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah, we have no shame. Our politicians have no shame in this country. And it's really become skewed because for some reason we've also made them celebrities, which to me is really weird to have a politician as a celebrity.

[00:32:08] **Mbali Ntuli:** But that's what we've done with the politicians in South Africa. I mean, we must reflect on that as a society because I also don't quite understand how we got there.

[00:32:16] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. I don't think it's only here. I think politics around the world, you know, I mean, you look at a guy that used to run that reality TV show called The Apprentice and would shout at people that they were fired and, you know, all of that kind of stuff.

[00:32:28] **Mike Abel:** And, you know, he, he became the president of the United States. So who knows what I mean, if you look at the incumbent as well, there are a million and one questions that one could ask. So one of the observations, uh, having spoken about Trump and Biden, and, you know, we spoke about Zuma just now and even the incumbent, you know, youth, South Africa needs younger people. South Africa needs, you know, fresh ideas. The world needs fresh ideas. Africa also,

[00:32:56] **Mbali Ntuli:** Definitely. I think there's something like 4 000 MPs and most of them are ... I think the median age of them was like 75 or something in Africa. Whereas the median age for Africa, I think is something like 27 or 29.

[00:33:11] **Mbali Ntuli:** So we definitely need more representation and not just youth, but also women. But I mean, you and I know the arguments for this, but, we have to work towards it. So, I mean, these people aren't just going to come out of nowhere. And like you said, you might have people that get degrees and do really well, but they might not have the social capital, the ins, the nuances to be able to play in these walls and we all who have been in them need to give them and help them and give them a hand up into these things, which is why I also love the work that another group that you work with, which is Future Elect does, because that's exactly what they do. They're trying to empower moral and ethical leaders across our continents to be able to take this space and to give them as much resources as they can so that they can do it because it is a tough and isolating place to be in, especially if you're going against the grain.

[00:33:57] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Well, I mean, I think that is the direction we need to be right now is against the grain. We need to be salmon swimming upstream. That's the only way we're going to drive change in South Africa.

[00:34:07] **Mbali Ntuli:** Why are you so invested in all of this? Because I know just personally that you are always willing and able to help all kinds of organizations that

come to you guys. And you have lots of pro bono work and a lot of it is to try and help us. But why is it so important to you? I mean, you've been very successful at business. You don't really have to be, I mean, it's nice that you are, but what's your personal investments in all of this?

[00:34:32] **Mike Abel:** It's very interesting because I am actually, you might not believe this, but apolitical.

[00:34:37] **Mike Abel:** I have no affiliation to a political party per se. I have an affiliation towards values and towards contribution and to what I think will make the country a better place. And so that is what I gravitate towards. You know, I was very lucky to grow up in a family where, I guess I saw service above self.

[00:34:59] **Mike Abel:** And that has always landed with me as a concept from being a little boy to try and make a difference in the world. And you and our friends, and you probably know this about me already, but, you know, I am the grandson of people that left Poland where their entire family was murdered by the Nazis or by the Poles, whichever way you look at it, because the Poles were, you know, very happy collaborators in the Holocaust, as were many other countries, the Romanians and other countries.

[00:35:25] **Mike Abel:** So, when you – Lithuania – when you look at growing up there and then you hear, and you think, well, yes, there were not gas chambers here, but there was tyranny. There was horror. There was murder, you know, going on in South Africa in terms of the previous regime. And you look around you and you think, well, you can't be a bystander to this.

[00:35:46] **Mike Abel:** You need to activate or operate in whichever way you can to bring sanity to bear, to bring change to bear, to help people. And then when apartheid ends, you can't suddenly look at the situation and say, well, okay, great. That's over and forget about, you know. Yeah. multiple generations of suppression and what that means in terms of making the country a much more fair place.

[00:36:09] **Mike Abel:** How do you create an inclusive economy? How do you create a sharing culture in South Africa from all races? And so what you don't want to do is transfer money from White South Africans to black South Africans. What you want to do is raise the entire ocean so that everybody can start to do well and everybody can actually be great neighbours and hopeful neighbours to one another.

[00:36:32] **Mike Abel:** And so often, Mbali, you know, you hear about this. Concept, which I have seen played out, you know, you spoke about the taxi industry and how they are so many amazing people and how, so how many terrible situations go on as well and I think that South Africa, we have this concept of ubuntu, which I don't see played out a lot.

[00:36:51] **Mike Abel:** You know, you see some people do it in spades and magnificently throughout their lives and other people are just set up to take and to grab. And so we went from one form of state capture in the old regime to another form of state capture in the new regime. And so I just want a much more just and inclusive society, and I don't see any reason why there shouldn't be.

[00:37:13] **Mike Abel:** And so in my own small way, I try to make a difference. I'm just wired that way.

[00:37:18] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I've seen it. I mean, I also, I follow a lot of your, your actual, your professional pages and I see that even with your hiring decisions, the way your offices are set up, the way the people speak about the culture at your business.

[00:37:29] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I think that it's, uh, it's a credit to you and obviously your parents and the way that they raised you, that that comes through and flows through naturally in that way. And then also the work that you do, and people don't know this, but I mean, when I started Ground Work Collective, we obviously went to Saatchi & Able to help us with the way that, you know, we would try to visualize and brand what we were trying to convey and we didn't have any money at the time.

[00:37:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** And you guys are really great and just being able to do that and helping us grow. And a big part of why we did eventually get money, I think, was the professionalization of how great you made us look. Um, and that is, yeah, that's amazing. And it's not just me. I mean, I've heard it from a number of different organizations that have said the same thing.

[00:38:11] **Mbali Ntuli:** So I think that that's really great. And it's testament to you living and actually doing what you say you believe.

[00:38:18] **Mike Abel:** Thank you. I appreciate it. I mean, for me, it's about living a purposeful life. You know, why would you want to be here? And, and yes, of course I've done nicely, but I don't get any, well, you like nice things in life and to do nice things and to eat nice things and to go to lovely places, but that doesn't give you a sense of purpose.

[00:38:38] **Mike Abel:** I think contributing to society and contributing to people and their careers... And that for me is the most important thing. I know when people say to me, Mike, what's the most important thing? You've done in your career. I wouldn't say going up on stage at Canne to win a Gold Lion for that campaign. And don't get me wrong, I love winning Gold Lions at Cannes and in the other words, but I'll say the Street Store, because we've been able to clothe over a million people around the world. And that for me is the most important thing is seeing the impact that we've made in people's lives and we continue to make in people's lives.

[00:39:12] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, the Street Store turns 10 years old this year and well over a thousand have happened around the world, which is...

[00:39:17] **Mbali Ntuli:** That is great. And in fact, now that I think about it, many years ago, you also helped another organization called Wheat because I, I did. Yeah, I was part of that with Angel Campey and a number of other South African women.

[00:39:28] **Mbali Ntuli:** So you guys have been doing a lot, actually, now that I think about it. Wow. We go way back, even before I knew you.

[00:39:34] **Mike Abel:** We do. We do indeed, but enough about me because I get embarrassed now. I'll want to, yeah, yeah, run out of the studio any moment. Let's go back to you. So Ground Work Collective, it fascinates because you're involved in so many different things in terms of food security and access to water and civic education.

[00:39:51] **Mike Abel:** Talk to us about Ground Work Collective and why you started it and why you lean into it because of course I know a lot about it but our listeners don't and how could they even get involved in helping you behind it?

[00:40:01] **Mbali Ntuli:** Sure, so in 2020 after I'd run the election to become the DA leader, My entire campaign was based on, you know, just a kinder, more accessible, open DA that operates in a very different way.

[00:40:14] **Mbali Ntuli:** And this was from my experience in working in very rural areas. And I think, you know, it was a long campaign, it was COVID. But two years later, I left because I felt like I could actually do a lot of the stuff that I'd wanted to do in the DA, but in a different vehicle. And it was very sad because I love politics and it definitely was my first love, but I believe that if it's meant to be, I'll get back into it.

[00:40:36] **Mbali Ntuli:** But I didn't also want to sit wasting away or hoping for, uh, A shot to another chance for someone to tap me on the shoulder and say, it's finally your time now. And at the same time, you know, just be stagnating as a human being. So I thought I would go out and do it. And what I wanted was to start an organization that looked at the holistic life cycle of a person.

[00:40:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** So, many people in South Africa don't have food or fortified food. Children are stunted. So food production for me was important. When I was growing up, my granny had a homestead. We still do. We visit her often and we were taught how to grow food. And I just don't see that being a big part of what younger generations get anymore.

[00:41:15] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so, so much of their money is being spent. You'd get them to do it in a tyre, for example. So same with creches and cases that don't get government subsidies. So I wanted to make sure, especially as a mom that no kid

would be starving in South Africa. And if this was a way that we could play into that role, then that's what we do.

[00:41:35] **Mbali Ntuli:** So our first pillar is food production and that's what we do. And we are piloting and doing a lot of work in many different communities now, which is really great. The second was in, of course, once somebody has some food, then they might need access to a job, especially if they're a young person to continue being able to live out their goals.

[00:41:54] **Mbali Ntuli:** So we try to do work where we match them up with mentors or offer them up-skilling opportunities so that they're able to do something and not just sit at home because there's also nothing as heart-breaking again, when you're doing door to door and you just constantly going into home after home after home where people are showing you their matric certificates, their BTEC certificates, and they can't get jobs and they're just sitting at home and eventually just wasting away.

[00:42:17] **Mbali Ntuli:** Doctors, yes of course, it's a huge issue right now.

[00:42:21] **Mike Abel:** We have Cubans, but we don't have jobs for our own doctors.

[00:42:23] **Mbali Ntuli:** We are just a country in a perpetual state of crisis when it comes to that. So for whatever role we can play, that's what we try to do. And then the last one is on all things being equal. If someone has food and you've given them some opportunity to now have a job, you want them to be an active citizen.

[00:42:37] **Mbali Ntuli:** So you want them to also be able to give back into the society, to contribute so that we continue the cyclical nature of uplifting each other. And so then we have our third pillar, which is civic education. And for us, this has probably been the biggest and most important one to start so I'm going to start off with because it really encapsulates what we're trying to do.

[00:42:54] **Mbali Ntuli:** We want to change the behaviour of how South Africans participate in the democracy. On average, it doesn't matter whether they're young or old or rich or poor, so Africans just don't know how their government works, they don't know how to get things done outside of waiting for a political party, and so we stay in the state of complete paralysis, not knowing that, you know, you can go sit in the IDP and be able to give input into the budget for your own ward.

[00:43:17] **Mbali Ntuli:** Who is your counsellor? Have you ever met them? Have you gone to a town hall meeting? Do you know that you can go to council meetings? Things like PPP. There's all this stuff that is part of our constitution and our legislation that makes us the most participatory democracy in the world. We literally get to decide what happens with our taxes at a policing level, at a schooling level.

[00:43:36] **Mbali Ntuli:** And yet so many of us don't actually do any of that. And I think a big part of it is because people don't know. And so we decided that we were going

to do something about that. And we're going to focus specifically on young people because it's just a bigger age group that exists and that has left out of these conversations.

[00:43:51] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so we started the exchange campaign. We've been registering young people, thousands of them for the last year, and we'll continue doing it even after the elections. And once we've registered people, Then we take them through the curriculum because we don't want to ask young people to vote, for example, for a ward counsellor when we haven't explained the difference between a ward and a PR counsellor and the multitudes of things.

[00:44:09] **Mbali Ntuli:** And then of course, after that, we ask them to be observers for the election. So for these elections, we aiming to cover 21 percent of the addiction stations. Yeah, we can all see it's going to be highly contested and we want. Every South African to give three hours of their time, everyone's going to go to vote.

[00:44:24] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so we'll be launching our portal soon to ask everyone to please volunteer to say that they'll do three hours at their voting station. And that's another way of getting people to start being more active. So that's the, that's the idea behind Ground Work Collective. Yeah. I think the goals we're going to be in schools.

[00:44:38] **Mbali Ntuli:** We're going to have board games. We're going to make it really fun for young people to actively understand democracy because I think that if we have that culture and behaviour shift, we won't have to worry about these silly political parties. Young people will find that solution on their own and will do it.

[00:44:51] **Street Store:** The Street Store turns 10 this year. The world's first rent-free, premises-free, free pop-up store provides a dignified shopping experience to those in need, allowing them to choose from a selection of pre-loved clothing and shoes. Over a thousand stores have been hosted around the world in the past decade. And now we're calling on you. Visit Thestreetstore.org to sign up and find out how.

[00:45:18] **Mike Abel:** So I love what you're saying because you are turning things on their head a little bit, you know, with unconventional approaches. One of the things I think you should do is go and see Cadbury's because you know they do that chewing gum called Chappies.

[00:45:30] **Mike Abel:** Oh yeah! And if you open a Chappies wrapper it says, did you know? And there's all kind of irrelevant rubbish in there. Why? Why? That should be, did you know that you could actually change your country by this? Did you know that you can actually have input on the budget? Did you know? So I think that you and Ground Work Collective and Cadbury's needs to collab on this.

[00:45:49] **Mike Abel:** No, no, absolutely. Straight off to this somebody. The other thing is, I see recently that one of your campaigns was handing out KFC vouchers for

those who registered for the first time. Now, aside from it being an astonishingly bad idea because you didn't give them Nando's vouchers, shameless punt for one of my clients there.

[00:46:11] **Mike Abel:** But, um...

[00:46:11] **Mbali Ntuli:** We had your other clients who were giving Superbalist vouchers. Oh, are you? Yeah, I see.

[00:46:15] **Mike Abel:** Okay, very cool. We're just all-rounders.

[00:46:18] **Mike Abel:** So, have you seen the need then to offer a bit of a promotion around activating behaviour?

[00:46:24] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think so. And it's not because I think that people don't care about their democracy, it's because there's so much noise in South Africa that to break through the sound barrier, you almost have to make people see what's in it for them to really pay attention.

[00:46:36] **Mbali Ntuli:** So I couldn't just say, Hey, my name is Mbali and I think it's really important you should vote. So like, why don't you come and register? Because no one would care. I mean, everyone's saying that. But if I say come and vote, you also get a free KFC voucher guaranteed. This is exciting. And we hook you in with that.

[00:46:51] **Mbali Ntuli:** We've seen a great conversion of those people actually signing up to be volunteers and to wanting to be part of it because they actually were incentivized by that KFC voucher. Everyone likes a free meal. And we've also had Superbalist vouchers.

[00:47:04] **Mike Abel:** So when people say there's no free lunches, there actually are.

[00:47:08] **Mbali Ntuli:** So yeah, it was really just around that and that particular strategy and it's worked well for us. I think with obviously the, the use of influences and, and celebrities that young people look up to. I think one of the things when we do our observers is also going to be using all the celebrities that love to get like a Francois Pienaar or someone to remind his generation, go out and, and do some observation and get them to do some sort of video for us.

[00:47:30] **Mbali Ntuli:** And all types of people, a Thuli Madondela and Lucas Radebe, you know, those people are still people that young people look up to, but I already think South Africans sometimes need a hook of something that interests them and sports, the great unifiers we saw last year. That would be really great. And it's just really about trying, and this is more your world than mine.

[00:47:48] **Mbali Ntuli:** Finding a, I'm taking notes, finding a way to get people excited about a brand or an idea. And for us, that's a democracy. So we'll throw everything until we find the very perfect combination.

[00:48:01] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think it's certainly a fight worth fighting. One of the other things that you spoke about apropos farming is, you know, I think that South Africans have, not just South Africans, all voters around the world have a degree of apathy and victimhood, like this is our lot.

[00:48:17] **Mike Abel:** As opposed to thinking, I can actually change this. I think that that notion or concept does not really live in people's minds other than maybe rocking up at the ballot and putting the little cross where it belongs. And I think that you and I are outliers, if you like, in this regard, because we absolutely believe that in order for things to change, you need to lead the change.

[00:48:38] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, I think it was Gandhi who said, be the change you wish to see in others. But I love this idea of subsistence farming because for the longest time in South Africa, I have thought that a way out of hunger, maybe not poverty per se, but hunger is certainly subsistence farming.

[00:48:54] **Mbali Ntuli:** Hundred percent.

[00:48:55] **Mike Abel:** And if people just learn to, you know, I actually wrote to the premier about two years ago and I said to him of the Western Cape and I said to him, you know, I know Johannesburg is the largest man-made forest in the world.

[00:49:05] **Mike Abel:** Wow. I didn't know that. Yeah. Yeah. And I said, Oh, can't we make Cape town, Western Cape, the largest vegetable farm in the world that wherever there's space, you know, and he loved the idea. And he said, go and talk to X, Y, and Z and then, you know, kind of daily work. It's in the way. And there are so many, only so many things that my partners allow me to run at before I get back into the commercial aspects of the firm, heaven forbid.

[00:49:31] **Mike Abel:** But I did think, you know, just imagine if when you drive even in from the airport, even if you've got pumpkin and you've got squash and you've got potatoes and cabbage, exactly, growing everywhere where people can just help themselves.

[00:49:43] **Mbali Ntuli:** And we will solve childhood stunting. Those first 1000 days, which are so crucial for a child ... because right now we are failing children before they even entered the schooling system. And then we wonder why they can't, you know, concentrate at school or do well. It's because their brains haven't even had the nourishment that they need because we've let them down.

[00:50:02] **Mbali Ntuli:** And in a country like ours, where we have everything to do this. This should be a no-brainer.

[00:50:06] **Mike Abel:** Absolutely, and it costs very little. Very little. The other thing for Ground Work Collective while we are kicking around some ideas is, I've never understood why people build orphanages separately to old-age homes, because what little kids need is love and what old people need is love.

[00:50:27] **Mike Abel:** And there's a great coming together in terms of, you know, and especially in a country like ours, we have old people that are forgotten and thrown kind of onto the trash heap of memory in a way. And you've got these young people that are so desperate for love and attention. And I think there's definitely a very powerful coming together or symbiotic relationship that we could do there.

[00:50:47] **Mike Abel:** What do you think?

[00:50:48] **Mbali Ntuli:** That is a great, great, great idea. And I actually sit on the board of PADCA, which is an old-age facility organization in KZN, particularly because of how we see this and I wanted to find a way to help, and I also used to sit on Crow, which dealt with children and animals. I think that's a great idea, actually.

[00:51:05] **Mbali Ntuli:** I mean, we'd have to, in this particular country, just because of our sexual abuse, be very careful about how we did it. But thinking of the best, I think that's brilliant. It could definitely be piloted. You're giving me lots more work now.

[00:51:17] **Mike Abel:** If, if anyone can do it, it'll be Mbali Ntuli. So if you could give advice to your 18-year-old self, what would it be?

[00:51:26] **Mike Abel:** I mean, I'm pretty sure a big chunk of it will be just exactly what you did Mbali, look where you are. But would there be any other advice that you'd like looking back, reflect on differently? No. I knew that was going to be.

[00:51:40] **Mbali Ntuli:** No I've had, I've had a really crazy life and it's been tough and really horrible, but it's given me great resilience and grit and I'm just so grateful.

[00:51:48] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I think a big part of that is because I've known that it could go away at any time. And I live my life with so much gratitude. I'm very happy. I love that I have my kids. I love that I enjoy what I do. So I wouldn't change much. I enjoyed my twenties. I don't miss the party life sometimes a little bit, but not too much.

[00:52:08] **Mbali Ntuli:** Maybe just be kinder to myself a little bit. I think I'm exceptionally hard on myself and was in my younger years. And I exerted myself sometimes to the point where it wasn't mentally or physically healthy. But also again, maybe I wouldn't have learned about that if I hadn't done it. So it is a boring way to answer, but...

[00:52:26] **Mike Abel:** No, it's not boring at all.

[00:52:27] **Mike Abel:** I imagine when you have achieved what you have so much in such a short amount of time so far that that would be a logical conclusion.

[00:52:29] **Mbali Ntuli:** What would you say to yourself?

[00:52:30] **Mike Abel:** No different either. Yeah. You know, so it's not that I haven't had hard knocks in life and that there haven't been profoundly painful experiences along the way, but each one of them has shaped me.

[00:52:51] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. And so you can look at a situation, you can say, how's the situation going to live with me? Or how's the situation going to liberate me? And I only look at negative situations in terms of what I can learn from them. Yeah. And I accept myself warts and all, so I know my faults and I do have faults and, and I embrace those because it's part of who I am.

[00:53:13] **Mbali Ntuli:** Me too. And I quite like myself actually. I'm very comfortable with who I am. And like you, I know my shortcomings and you know, you can only try to work towards being better. Yeah, as much as you can do and to just be comfortable with that.

[00:53:28] **Mike Abel:** Well, that's right. And, and I say, you know, you never repeat a mistake.

[00:53:32] **Mike Abel:** You make a mistake once and thereafter it becomes a decision. So I think, so I think one needs to take responsibility for that. You know, that if you, if you've done something wrong and you, and you've learned from it, then don't repeat it, you know, change tactic. So if we're talking about looking back, when you resigned from the DA, as I understand in your resignation letter, you thanked colleagues from across the political divide and members of the media and the public for both the lashings and the love that whipped you into a stronger, harder leader.

[00:54:07] **Mike Abel:** And that's interesting for me because you felt that you gained something out of the lashings. Do you think lashings are an important part, metaphorically in evolving into being a good leader?

[00:54:19] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think so. I think they're important for, for sometimes shaping. I mean, it's not that they were always fair, but again, that's, that's only something you can learn from and, and accept.

[00:54:30] **Mbali Ntuli:** So for me in particular, when I said I was thanking colleagues from across the board, I was the youngest female member in the register for a long time. And. A lot of the IFP and ANC and even EFF women in particular were very protective of me as their daughter more than anything across political spectrums.

[00:54:47] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I think I'm quite respectful. And so they had a great affinity towards me. But at the same time, you know, because they were much older and I used to come to the legislature, perhaps not dressed as conservatively as I, they would like, as they would like, you know, that there's kinds of things where, oh Mbali this or, or because I could sometimes be quite strident in my opposition to them and some things that's not really Zulu, you're an uppity young lady, but those are all really important.

[00:55:15] **Mbali Ntuli:** And same with the public. I mean, the public was really brutal. When people like myself and Makashule and Lindiwe, suddenly in the DA, we were called a coconut, no one took us seriously, sell-outs. Black people that were in the DA were certain types, and that really fortifies your ability to be able to craft a message and stick to it about why you're doing what you're doing and to not waver in your principles and what you believe.

[00:55:37] **Mbali Ntuli:** And it, it was important because I think it also helps to drive you to prove that you're doing this for the right reasons. And I think very few people throw those accusations towards me. Sure. Probably in the last decade, I didn't think anyone has said that because even though they might not have liked the party, I think they were able to see that you were willing to do the work.

[00:55:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I'd like to think I would have always done it, but I think definitely the lashings of. The public in that respect made me all the more acutely aware of what was at stake for me, what I think of what I was doing, and even whatever people actually might think about race in the context of me being black in the DA. So those are great.

[00:56:14] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Well, I mean, that's an interesting thing because I have a slightly different perspective and that is when people were calling you those names and insulting you, I think it's because they took you very seriously, not because they didn't take you seriously. I think if they didn't take you seriously, they would have ignored you.

[00:56:32] **Mike Abel:** But the fact that they did try and troll you and bring you down means they saw you as a threat. So maybe you want to just ponder on that a little bit, because I thought that you and Lindiwe, Makashule, Mmusi, we're doing the most unbelievable job as a collective, Phumzile, to shift the narrative because you know, for me in South Africa and just looking at pure demographics and taking away anything else, and I'm not talking about identity politics, I'm talking about relating to a political party and thinking that a political party represents the future.

[00:57:07] **Mike Abel:** I think you have to be a black party that whites vote for in order to have a successful future in the country, because if you don't represent people, not just in terms of values, but in terms of, I see, you've got my back. I see you understand me. I don't understand what the future would be for that kind of a party.

[00:57:25] **Mike Abel:** And I'm not referring to the DA specifically over here. I'm talking about any party around the world. You need to represent the hopes and dreams and aspirations of the people. And if the people comprising that party don't represent that in and of themselves, then why would you go with it? You know what I mean?

[00:57:42] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah, and I think one of the things very interestingly after that is that when we left, and all of us have actually left now, including people like Hlanganani Gumbi, Zwakele Mncwango, you know, people would say, Oh, you failed or you didn't do it. I don't see it like that at all.

[00:57:57] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think what we actually did is, and this is something that I think you need to be comfortable with as a leader too, is you might not be the one that always gets to the end of the journey, but you might be the people that started.

[00:58:07] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so of course you'll be lashed the most, but the next people will have an easier time and the next people and the next people. And there's many young people in the DA who constantly tell me even now that they joined or were part of the first structures that I did. And there's also many young people outside of just general politics who I meet all the time that talk about their interest in politics being peaked by us at that time.

[00:58:28] **Mbali Ntuli:** And last week I spoke on one of Futurelect's graduation panels and three of the women there said that they entered politics because of myself and Lindiwe and were inspired to do so and had not seen other black young people on there. So that for me is very rewarding and doesn't feel like a failure at all.

[00:58:44] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I hope that they will have more success in whatever political vehicles they choose to continue the good work. So it was tough, but I wouldn't change it at all.

[00:58:54] **Mike Abel:** Well, that's the thing and, and life is very fluid. So whether or not you're going to come back into it one day or whether or not you're going to be our president one day, I have no idea, but I'd vote for you, Mbali, and I have.

[00:59:07] **Mike Abel:** One of the interesting things being the overachiever that you are, you were selected as a Mandela Washington Fellow. Which I understand is a flagship programme that empowers young people through academic coursework. What can you tell people that might be interested in that? Because I'm sure a lot of people are saying, well, you know, it's unbelievable Mbali's journey and it is, and you're still really young.

[00:59:30] **Mike Abel:** What did you learn from that experience? And is there anything you'd like to impart to our listeners around that?

[00:59:36] **Mbali Ntuli:** I thought it was a great program. So obviously it was started by President Obama as a way to try and help young African leaders. And I was in the first year and I think in that year I was the only South African politician that was chosen, which was very interesting because I ended up having to go to represent South Africa at an AU function and the president didn't arrive at the time.

[00:59:55] **Mbali Ntuli:** So it was just myself and Nkosazana looking at each other in a room, but it was a great programme. But what I think for me, it really showed was that the problems of the US in particular are very similar to what we're facing in South Africa. And there's a lot for us to glean from the rest of the world, particularly so called more advanced democracies about what not to do actually.

[01:00:15] **Mbali Ntuli:** But I would encourage people to go for it. Uh, there's so many programmes within the Mandela Washington Fellowship that are really great. And I think South Africans should always take that ability only because I also think it's really great to leave South Africa to see how wonderful this country is, because I think it invigorates people to fight for it more.

[01:00:32] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so every single one of the people in my class, I think have come back and are still contributing very much to South Africa. So yeah.

[01:00:39] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. And I think that's very valuable because I think often. South Africans travel and study abroad. I remember in Lindiwe, I think we went to Harvard. There's a perspective of things aren't good enough in South Africa, so that's why you've gone to do those things. And it's quite the opposite. That's because you want to pick up a global and a worldly perspective and then to bring those gifts back to South Africa.

[01:01:02] **Mbali Ntuli:** A hundred percent. And there's just something about also learning from people who, as you say, might be advanced to us in, in other respects.

[01:01:10] **Mbali Ntuli:** I mean, one of the things that I really loved was just. You know, campaigning tools. And at that time, this was in 2014, we didn't have as sophisticated sort of polling and software that we do now. And for me, it was very great to even have had that because I think it held me in good stead in my work that I came back and did in constituencies that were pretty rural and where I put them to good use to help what needed to be done.

[01:01:34] **Mike Abel:** So being this career woman and dynamo that you are, you know, some people would not know how to balance motherhood, parenting with careers, but I'm constantly in awe of the magical things you do with your kids and what you post and your daughter Sarabi amuses me no end.

[01:01:56] **Mbali Ntuli:** Quite sassy, that one.

[01:01:57] **Mike Abel:** Yeah I can see that.

[01:01:58] **Mike Abel:** She's a little Mbali. But, um, In terms of parenting, what do you think your kids have taught you? What has motherhood taught you?

[01:02:07] **Mbali Ntuli:** Oh, Mike, there's nothing that I love more than being a mum. And I always, it sounds very cheesy, but I always knew I was going to be a mum and I always knew that I was going to have my two children.

[01:02:17] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so, to have them at the time just feels really amazing. And I see them as a constant gift. Patience is probably one of the biggest ones because toddlers are slow, oh my goodness, he's so slow in a lot of different ways, but also it reminds you to also slow down and I love. I think I am quite childlike anyway.

[01:02:36] **Mbali Ntuli:** I love reliving the most magical moments of childhood. Even though I had a traumatic life in some degrees, I never felt like I had a traumatic childhood. I think my parents were really great about just making sure that we really had great lives and great challenges. And it's been really great for me to be able to do that with my kids and to be present.

[01:02:56] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think for me, and I would love to hear your opinion on this, because I see how you parent as well, and your kids are much older, but they come back home and you guys have, you know, family dinners and you're always doing great things. And I think that's the one thing that a parent really wants. I live in constant terror of the anxiety, firstly of dying before my kids are old and I've like helped them in the world, but also of just making sure that they, and I'm sure we all screw up but that I don't screw them up too much. And, you know, how do you balance that? I'm away from them quite a bit right now. I'm trying to do it for them, but also they would probably like me to physically be there. There's all these things that you have to deal with as a parent. And I'd be interested in how you were able to really balance.

[01:03:35] **Mbali Ntuli:** I'm still figuring it out. Sarabi is five and Akhani is 18 months. So I've still got a long way to go learning some of these lessons.

[01:03:41] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Well, I mean, a big part of it, I can actually thank Sara, my wife, for, because I became the managing director of Ogilvy Cape Town at a very young age. I was like 32 years old and I became a dad at 34.

[01:03:57] **Mike Abel:** And, uh, And I used to work all hours. I mean, you know, I didn't win that job in a competition. I worked really, really hard and, you know, kind of like, how do you kind of bubble up to the top of a big company at such a young age? And that's through, I guess, a combination of talent and ability and, and, and work ethic, but when Sara fell pregnant, she said to me, I want you home at half past five, every night now, and that you there to help me bath the kids, my eldest is Ricky, who's now turning 24 this year. And I've got two other boys, Jake and Anthony, and they're all my life, you know, Sarah and my boys are my life. You know, I love my career and I love

my friends and my colleagues that I work with, but being a dad is the most important thing in my life and being a husband, and it was the same being a son to my parents.

[01:04:46] **Mike Abel:** But when you love what you do, I guess, and I love being a dad, it comes through because you want to spend time with your kids. You enjoy spending time with them and they know that you enjoy spending time with them. So, you know, there's that rubbish, I guess, Victorian concept of children are to be seen and not heard.

[01:05:04] **Mike Abel:** You know, and I think children are to be heard. They're there to be, you know, active participants. And I guess I grew up in a house where my grandparents and my parents adored us and wanted to hear our opinions. We weren't pushed into a corner and and told to keep quiet. So I did learn quite a lot from them.

[01:05:21] **Mike Abel:** But as I said, Sara used to say to me, please be home at five thirty at night. And if I was going to be home at like six o'clock, even. But I don't know how many meetings I'd be at where it was quarter past five, and I'd say, I'm terribly sorry, everybody, and people would look at me in complete shock, although I told them that I'd be leaving.

[01:05:38] **Mbali Ntuli:** Kudos to you.

[01:05:39] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. That I would leave, and I would leave. I had the discipline to leave, and that didn't mean that once the kids went to bed at night, that I didn't go and sit at my computer at nine o'clock at night and work until 11 or 12. I often did. You know, and if the child woke up, I didn't see it as Sarah's job to change nappies or, you know.

[01:05:56] **Mike Abel:** Give the kid the bottle. So I would often be up at night with my kids,

[01:06:00] **Mbali Ntuli:** A man ahead of his time.

[01:06:02] **Mike Abel:** You know, because, uh, it's a shared responsibility, you know, and I also did grow up in a house where I don't think that my dad ever changed a nappy or, you know, knew how to do much until he was much older, you know, in terms of making a cup of coffee, even, you know, truly, you know, but, uh, I just thought that you want to muck in, you want to experience it.

[01:06:21] **Mike Abel:** So. And that has been rewarded because my children enjoy spending time with me and Sara and travelling together and doing many wonderful things together.

[01:06:30] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah, my only goal is to make sure that they feel loved and I hope that that will come through and that, you know, they'll forgive me if there's any

mistakes that we make along the way, but I love them so much and I enjoy everything to do with them.

[01:06:42] **Mike Abel:** I can see those beautiful parties that you, that you throw. Well, I can only say it's downhill from here because you don't get much better than those parties that you threw. So we're in the home stretch of this conversation. At the end of each episode of Willing and Abel, I like to ask a cornerstone question if you like.

[01:07:02] **Mike Abel:** And my question for you today is, what important thing have you changed your mind about in your own life where you might have held a strongly held position on something that you've now rethought or reconsidered?

[01:07:14] **Mbali Ntuli:** That's a good one. I think the concept of where the people can change or not. That's interesting.

[01:07:19] **Mbali Ntuli:** When I was growing up and after everything that had happened to my family, I had a hit list of people that I thought when I was older, I was definitely going to go after them for what they had done. And I felt it very strongly in my soul. I mean, I really didn't conceptualise it that I was going to kill them or anything, but....

[01:07:35] **Mbali Ntuli:** That's the taxi boss in here talking. I'm terrified. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I felt like I needed to do something. And one of those people that had come into our home the one day and shot into our beds where we would have been sleeping, but luckily my mum had taken us to school just earlier that day.

[01:07:53] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so she was left in there, fighting for her life, and ran out of the house. And there was a restaurant across the road from my house. So she ran in her sort of nightdress in there and there was, you know, the patrons who saw this man with a shotgun running after her, who then tackled him down. And that person was my uncle.

[01:08:13] **Mike Abel:** Oh, wow.

[01:08:13] **Mbali Ntuli:** And for years, I...

[01:08:15] **Mike Abel:** Being your dad's brother?

[01:08:16] **Mbali Ntuli:** And my mum's brother. Your mum's brother. So, I mean, it was, everyone was being fought off, you know? Oh, my word. Yeah, my granny tried to, on my father's side, tried to even poison my brother. There was lots of money at stake. But, for years, I held on to deep, deep hatred, I think, and just, uh...

[01:08:34] **Mike Abel:** I mean, you saw your mum's brother tried to kill his sister.

[01:08:37] **Mbali Ntuli:** Well, I wasn't there, but it was, you know, but that's what we're talking about here, just to put a finer point on it. And he also shot into where we would have been sleeping. So he would have tried to kill us too. And this is an uncle that was close to us. So we'd grown up with this person and for a long time, I just, you know, I couldn't grasp myself around the concept of how this could happen.

[01:08:56] **Mike Abel:** Well, hate would be a natural response. So I don't think it's a, it's the wrong response. I can understand and relate to that. Yeah.

[01:09:01] **Mbali Ntuli:** And I hated him for what he'd done to my mum and my family and vowed to, you know, to have never spoken to him again and just never thought that he could have changed from the person that he had been.

[01:09:11] **Mbali Ntuli:** Over the years, you know, my mum's forgave him, which I was very angry about and we almost didn't speak for five months, my mum and she had told me, and this was just, you know, five years ago and I only started speaking to her again and my mum and I are very close when I got pregnant and told her that I was pregnant with my daughter.

[01:09:28] **Mbali Ntuli:** And, you know, then we had the conversation, but then that also meant that I had to now speak to him because he was now back into her life, which was, I suppose, now looking back at a huge of her and he had changed.

[01:09:40] **Mike Abel:** Really? Wow.

[01:09:40] **Mbali Ntuli:** And he had really changed, and in his own way, made atonements and I went from being terrified to being around him, and I mean, I'm still slightly, you know, just always alert.

[01:09:50] **Mike Abel:** Just keep that pepper spray or taser on hand.

[01:09:52] **Mbali Ntuli:** Yeah, I just, always alert, but he's somebody that is in our lives now.

[01:09:56] **Mike Abel:** Really?

[01:09:57] **Mbali Ntuli:** And he does seem to have fundamentally changed and, and really, you know, come to terms with what he had done and everything. And I, I would never have thought that. I mean, there's a number of examples of these kinds of things, but I mean, that's the one that's glaring, I suppose, is I've changed my mind about whether people can change or not.

[01:10:12] **Mike Abel:** Did he go to jail for that crime?

[01:10:15] **Mbali Ntuli:** No. He went to jail at that time, sort of because he was caught and whatever, but I don't know if it was because my mum couldn't testify against her brother or if there was pressure from the family or what happened, but he didn't stay in there for very long. Oh really?

[01:10:28] **Mbali Ntuli:** And so that was also another sense of the injustice that I felt about the whole situation.

[01:10:33] **Mike Abel:** So that's a very remarkable story. And, and it's a story that I'm actually going to choose to leave this conversation on because I think it's so powerful that, you know, my automatic thing is to then segue into something that is light and you and I can then have a laugh about it.

[01:10:49] **Mike Abel:** But I think that forgiveness and understanding. You've pushed to the nth degree in this particular thing because it's a particularly unique story and please God, he has changed and has learned his lessons and becomes the uncle and brother that he needs to be. Actually, it's remarkable. It is indeed. Mbali, thanks so much for joining me today.

[01:11:13] **Mike Abel:** I mean, this has been an unbelievably deep and rich conversation, multi-layered. It's certainly been fascinating to hear how simple ideas are sometimes much more layered and complicated underneath the surface.

[01:11:28] **Mbali Ntuli:** Thank you so much for having me too. It's been really great. And I really love what you've done, this idea of the podcast.

[01:11:33] **Mbali Ntuli:** I think it's really great. And I'm looking forward to listening to other guests as well.

[01:11:45] **Mike Abel:** Thanks so much for listening today. If you enjoyed this podcast, why not leave us a five-star review? And that's a wrap for the first season of Willing and Abel. Thank you so much for tuning in to these conversations, and I hope to have more conversations that challenge perspectives very soon. Be sure you subscribe so that you don't miss any upcoming episodes. Thank you.

[01:12:08] **Credits:** This podcast is produced by 2Stories. Written by Linda Scarborough, produced by Carol Williams, with audio editing, engineering and sound design by Kozi Mzimela and production assistance from M&C Saatchi Group South Africa's team, Maciek Dubla and Nadia Siegel. Special thanks to Sonic Nursery and Edible Audio for the recording of these episodes.