

Young woman on a mission to see university fees fall

A force to be reckoned with, she led the Wits student protests like a struggle hero

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SHAERA Kalla can't sing. While she shares this problem with a large portion of the world, it matters more for her than most people because, until last Sunday, Kalla was the president of the student representative council (SRC) at Wits University. She was also one of the leaders who spearheaded the #FeesMustFall protest movement.

"I can't sing. I can't control a crowd the way others can. And I'm a woman," Kalla said with a laugh as she took a short break from meetings to relax in the shade.

Yet somehow, she, along with other SRC members, managed to rally students nationwide over the issue of student fee increases in what became the largest student protest South Africa has seen since the dawn of democracy.

Kalla began the school year as deputy president of the SRC, but after Mcebisi Dlamini found himself in trouble with the university, she took the post.

Prior to the #FeesMustFall protest, she helped organise a One Million One Month campaign that raised money to pay the registration fees for certain students because there wasn't enough money from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to cover all those who qualified.

The campaign raised more than R4.4million.

Kalla's time on the SRC

showed her the various problems facing students, issues that she couldn't ignore. "It's a scary experience because of the structural problems that you witness on an individual level when you talk to students," she said.

Kalla and the other student representatives in the university's council lost the vote over student fee increases on October 2. "I was infuriated," she said. "I didn't sleep that night, plotting to see what we could do, because we just weren't

“We chose to hit the university and the country where it hurts”

satisfied with the reasons they gave us for why fees needed to increase. If you look at the composition of council, it's quite scary the kind of people who make decisions for black students, who understand so little about the struggles that these students go through."

On the first morning of the protest, Kalla stood with her peers at the main gate in Empire Road, where the blockade began as early as 6am. They knew they needed only about 20 students to shut down the gates, and they used cars as blockades until enough people arrived. Once they had the numbers, they replaced the

cars with bodies, daring their professors and peers to run them over.

"The intention of blocking entrances was to symbolise how inaccessible universities are," she said, explaining that the strategy was inspired by the tactics of Struggle heroes.

Part of the plan, she said, was to kill the label "born frees" that her generation carries.

"It's simply naive and extremely problematic to think that we are now free in our society, that black pain is now over because apartheid is over. If you look at throughput and the number of black students who graduate in record (prescribed) time, it doesn't give a positive image of the way our universities are run."

When the media arrived at the gate and asked what was going on, everyone pointed at Kalla. The 22-year-old spoke with intensity in her brown eyes about the systematic exclusion of poor, mostly black students that created a de facto continuation of apartheid.

"When things affect white monopoly capital, it seems to get a very different reaction," she explained in a recent interview. "That's why we chose to shut down and not just protest and chant. We needed to affect the academic programme. We needed to hit the university and the country where it hurt."

When a frustrated white student got out of his car and yelled "Who's in charge here?" Kalla stepped forward. Moments later, he was the first



DETERMINED: Former Wits SRC president Shaera Kalla galvanised the student protests.

PICTURE: DUMISANI DUBE



ACHIEVED THEIR GOAL: Wits University students demonstrate against fee increases last month.

PICTURE: KIM LUDBROOK / EPA

person to attack the protesters in a fight that was quickly separated by security.

"The violence of police and of white students in particular cannot be ignored," said Kalla as she recalled being rammed by another white male student on a motorcycle that first morning. "Students have been traumatised by the racism we have witnessed."

She explained that about a month's worth of planning went into the protest, strategising that, above all, the protest must remain peaceful. "Generally what the media reports on is not the reason why students are protesting but the damage to property, the violence," Kalla explained.

They knew that if they were going to get their message out, they needed to practise non-violence.

Despite their best efforts, violence still made headlines in newspapers' front pages. This was particularly the case when students retaliated against a driver, another white man, who ploughed through an intersection, endangering hundreds. Such depictions made Kalla's family doubt the cause.

This is the way forward

AS SHE handed over the Wits SRC presidency last Sunday, Shaera Kalla posted these instructions to her successor on Facebook, instructions that she said her predecessor, Mcebisi Dlamini, had given her:

"Pick up my gun and keep on fighting."

She quoted one of her heroes, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, who she said taught her the importance of negotiating on your own terms and not someone else's. "You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future."

Though Kalla's term was ending, she emphasised looking at the bigger picture for the future of the struggle. "Part of being revolutionary is being realistic, right?" she said.

She wants to see a national coalition established with input from student groups at campuses across South Africa. The group would put together a strategy for the movement to continue in 2016, in whatever way it determines would be the most useful towards getting free education.

When asked whether the SA Student congress (Sasco) should be the organisational base for her envisioned coalition, she said she thought so, but she emphasised that Sasco needed to step up.

"Sasco should've done this a long time ago," she said.

Looking ahead to her own future, Kalla said she doesn't see herself working for Sasco nationally or making a career out of organising work.

She wants to pursue a master's degree once she graduates with honours.

"I don't want to become a mouthpiece," she said. "I want to try to find a space where I can look at policy and the way in which we can influence society in a more streamlined way."

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A cleaner and greener Ekurhuleni starts with you!

Siyakhokha Siyathuthuka towards a clean city

YOU CAN CREATE A CLEANER AND GREENER EKURHULENI BY FOLLOWING THESE SIMPLE TIPS:

- Do not litter, put waste in the bin;
- Put your garbage bags out for collection on the day as indicated on your waste / removal calendar;
- Do not pollute lakes and dams;
- Do not dump your waste and building rubble in an open space;
- Do not burn waste in the veld or an open space;
- Reuse paper, glass and plastic whenever possible;
- Do not use harsh chemical, such as paraffin and diesel in your garden;
- Do not overload your vehicle as it increases air pollution;
- Walk or cycle short distances instead of driving;
- To save the environment, buy a solar heating system as it uses natural energy;
- Plant indigenous trees in open spaces as they are evergreen and require less water;
- Support greening campaigns by growing your own plants and vegetables;
- Do not cut down trees to use as fire wood; and
- Do not cut down trees as they provide oxygen and shade.

a partnership that works

Life's not easy if you stutter

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DANIEL* can't remember how old he was when he realised he spoke differently from other children.

While his peers articulated their thoughts clearly and freely, Daniel couldn't finish a sentence without stuttering. As he got older, he started to suffer from low self-esteem. He withdrew, only speaking when necessary.

School wasn't easy. He dreaded orals because he knew that struggling to express himself in front of the class would only bring him shame.

"They would laugh even before I spoke," he said. "When I'm angry, I can't even get the words out. I can't talk, that is why I just leave because I feel like I want to strangle that person."

According to Dina Lilian, a speech therapist and audiologist, stuttering is characterised by disruptions in the forward flow of speech such as the repetition of parts of words like "mi-mi-mi-miss" and prolongations of sounds

like "sssssseven".

It is also characterised by complete blockages of sound where no sound is emitted and only a strangled sound emerges, and the stutter may be accompanied by physical tension or a struggle.

As the stutterer battles to get the words out, they may blink, grimace, avoid eye contact, cough or tap their foot, she said.

Lilian, who runs the Stuttering Clinic at the Donald Gordon Medical Centre in Joburg, said there were no definitive answers to the causes of stuttering despite continuing research, and almost all people who stutter experience periods of fluency.

"Most people who stutter speak fluently when they are alone, when they speak in unison, when they whisper and when they sing."

"Stuttering does not affect any particular social group. It does not strike only at the exceptionally gifted or the academically challenged.

No definitive answers to the causes

"Children who stutter are, as a group, no less intellectually, academically or emotionally well-functioning than their peers," she said.

Daniel has learnt to manage his stutter by speaking slowly. And if the word he wants to use won't come out, he uses an alternative one.

His stuttering and the subsequent humiliation he suffered didn't stop him from pursuing his dream of becoming a journalist.

While in his final year at university, he was employed at a local newspaper as a sports writer.

Shortly afterwards, he was offered a job as a field reporter at a community radio station, but his stutter was an impediment to doing his job well.

"I would need an hour to file a story my colleagues would have filed in a few minutes."

So, after graduating, Daniel became a media liaison officer. His job entailed liaising with journalists, but he didn't give interviews.

Today, however, he is a spokesman for a government department and is forced to give live interviews on radio and TV.

Daniel was worried about his stutter but he said he accepted the job because the people around him believed in him.

Although he tries his best to control his stutter, it recurs when he least expects it.

One such crucial moment was when he was doing a live interview with Tim Modise on PowerFM recently.

"I wanted to use the word 'conspiracy' and I could feel that it wasn't coming out."

"I wasn't going to keep saying 'co-co-co' on live radio; so I had to find another longer way of saying that sentence."

A few days earlier, however, Daniel had done a radio interview which he said was the worst in his career.

Now that he knows there is therapy available, Daniel is considering it.

"Not only because of my job; I need to improve my speech," he said.

*Not his real name.

It may not heal, but therapy can help



MUCH IMPROVED: Graham Klawansky still stutters, but therapy helped him control it.

problems than people who don't stutter, but stuttering may cause psychological anxieties.

She also believes an adult needs to be ready for therapy because treatment isn't easy.

"Some people only seek treatment at an older age when they realise the impact their stuttering is having on their social lives or careers. An example

may be that the person could be avoiding giving presentations at work and therefore limiting their career opportunities, or they may not be talking at parties, thus limiting their opportunity to meet people."

Lilian said stuttering can be addressed at any age but that early intervention was best so the child who stutters doesn't develop any negative feelings about speaking. Her youngest patient was two years old while the oldest was 70.

Among Lilian's patients is Graham Klawansky, a 25-year-old accounts executive from Greenside.

When he was young, Klawansky's stutter was so bad, he could barely speak.

His parents took him for therapy but that didn't help. He believes the reason he never

improved was because the therapists at the time didn't know much about stuttering.

"My stutter was so severe that when other pupils did their oral in class, I did mine privately. If it was a two-minute speech, I would need eight minutes," he said.

Three years ago, he heard of Lilian through an organisation called Speakeasy.

He has been her patient since then, and he said the difference was unbelievable.

"There are still days when I am unable to communicate, but I have learnt to control it."

Klawansky said it was hard to tell how long he would be in therapy for, and he'd probably always stutter.

Due to the fact that Klawansky is able to communicate better thanks to therapy, he said other stutterers need to realise there is help, and they should seek it out.

"With the right help you can control it," he said.

For more information, call Lilian on 082 820 6225 or email her at dina.lilian@gmail.com. You can also visit www.speakeasy.org.za