

Mimi Kalinda - Living her passion for a better Africa

 By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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Mimi Kalinda co-founded Africa Communications Media Group (ACG) in 2012. At the beginning of this year, she was named the best PR leader 2022 for the Africa Region by the World Communication Forum Association.



Her love affair with storytelling started early, when she was five years old and living in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Her father was a diplomat, so the family travelled the world, never settling for long in one place, making it difficult for her to make lasting friendships. But she says, the one constant, no matter where they travelled, was television.

This is how her love affair with the small screen began. It would lead her to an on-camera career, first as a Channel O presenter and then as a VJ on MTV. In fact, she was the first African face on the MTV Europe channel.

From independent child to media personality

“The more I watched television, the more I understood that this thing actually shapes the world that we live in,” she says.

The family moved to South Africa when she was 13 years old. “1994 was the most impactful year for me. The country was transitioning to democracy and because I had become such a fan of television, the psychology of the media became obvious to me even at that age,” she says.

It fascinated her how this country was able to transition from what it was, to everybody loves each other, we are the rainbow nation, etc. “Even at that age, I realised that a certain narrative was being built to enable this transition.”

“ *My passion... is the way in which Africa is portrayed and the impact of that on the self-image of African immigrants.* ”

Yet, further up the continent in Rwanda, where her mother is from, there was a genocide happening. “As you know, the genocide was partly started by a mass media campaign on radio encouraging people to commit atrocities.”

She realised the power of media, but also that it can be used both for good and bad. “That’s when I thought, media is what I will do, but for good. If there are more of us doing good, with this platform and this tool, maybe by changing mindsets and getting people to see the similarities between themselves rather than the differences, then what kind of world could we build?”

That is how her journey began. “An evolution from a child looking for TV friends to my TV friends actually having a lot of impact in the world from shaping me and others to bigger world issues.”

From presenter to activist

She eventually quit MTV and moved to New York, where she enrolled at New York University (NYU) to study a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies. While at NYU, she interned for film director Spike Lee, who was one of her mentors and a professor at NYU, eventually working for his production company after graduation.

“I spent a lot of time around Lee and his crew and on film sets. While it was very creative, it was also a social-political environment. If you watch Lee’s films, you will know that he addresses social economic issues within the African-American community.”

At this point, she had become quite an activist in New York. “My passion - it was my thesis for my degree and I made a documentary on it - was around the image of Africa on global stages, in particular, the way in which Africa is portrayed and the impact of that on the self-image of African immigrants who live in the US,” she explains.

The path back to Africa

It was this passion and a discussion with Lee that would lead her back to Africa.

“Lee’s movies are not to get everyone in the US to think about African-Americans in a certain way, he makes his movies for African-Americans first; the fact that everybody else consumes them is great.”

“ I had no idea what PR was even about, but I got a PR job and I loved it. ”

This was his point to her, that she should consider this mindset and model, putting the continent first and if others notice then that's fantastic.

“He thought that if I did what he does here (in NY) but on the continent, I would have so much more impact,” she adds.

He also then dared her not to go to SA, but back to her birthplace, the DRC, and to “go figure it out”.

“I love a challenge, so I moved to DRC (although I have not been there since I was five years old) and, with some friends from NYU who were also passionate about the continent, formed a production company and did what we called 'change communications'.”

Funding from USAID allowed them to buy a dilapidated house in Kinshasa. “The most fulfilling thing about making films in that country was that we recruited talented young people with little to no opportunities. We trained them on the art of storytelling and filmmaking and they lived in this house while they did this. The DRC still has so many street children who have nowhere to go and nothing to do.”

The films they made were around HIV/Aids prevention and also violence against women.

“Many years later I received a phone call from one of these young people who is now a renowned producer working in advertising.”

This was 2007.



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Finding PR and communications

However, most of her family had lived in South Africa since the 90s and she did not have much family left in the DRC.

When she was expecting her daughter, she decided she wanted to be around family when she had her so she moved back to South Africa. “I consider South Africa home. It’s the most home I have had of all my homes.”

Back in South Africa she settled into motherhood. “My eldest son is now 16 and when I had him, I was driving trucks through the DRC and shooting films. For my second child, I wanted peace and calm.”

“ I made a decision very early on that I was going to use my career in media and storytelling for good. ”

This hiatus was interrupted when, while doing work for Samsung on the African Cup of Nations, and shooting in Tanzania, she met Deana Peterson, who ran Weber Shandwick in SA.

The two connected and when they were back in Johannesburg, Peterson called her about doing work around behavior-changing communications.

The public relations industry was changing, moving from press releases to incorporate more storytelling and content production.

“I had never considered working in PR - I had no idea what PR was even about, but I got a job at Weber Shandwick and I loved it.”

It was a combination of everything she had ever done. “The content, the speaking, the strategy thinking around the impact of the media, the influencing, and trying to persuade. This was what I had been looking for.”

Creating a continent for our children

Ten years ago, she co-founded her own PR and communications company to deliver on her passion for global development - “anything that pushes the continent forward”.

Her passion shines through as she talks about her work.

“I made a decision very early on that I was going to use my career in media and storytelling for good, so for me it is about the impact of the work that we have done.

“Our work touches on almost every single challenge that the continent might be facing from gender equity, food security, agriculture, small farmers, the energy crisis, and sustainability, to climate change. Really my heart is to do work that directly influences people’s lives in a positive way.”

For her PR and communications are a tool. “They are a tool to directly impact people’s lives. While we are not brain surgeons and finding the cure for cancer, within the bigger context, we are driving to the same destination but maybe in different vehicles, and the blue vehicle is PR and communications.

“And that is what I bring to the table. Others bring other tools but the whole idea is to see a continent that we want our children to live in generations from now.”

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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