



GROUND WATER
DIVISION

Water Women Wednesday

25 August 2021

Oudi Kgomongwe is a sterling manifestation of visionary women with a heart for South Africa's people and its water. This Women's Month, the Young Professionals Committee of the Ground Water Division speaks to her about her work as a hydrogeologist and how she uses science as a public service.



Think back to your earliest memories, what was your first inkling that you wanted to be a scientist?

I remember being a curious child that would ask questions about why the sky is blue or why blood is red. I have also always cared deeply about my friends, their well-being and my community that I started taking part in addressing when I was introduced to the Southern African Red Cross along with my mother in Mokopane.

Being innovative, I would often create my own things that I couldn't find in local shops – like putting together a pair of high heels from left over pieces of roofing wood to make the child version of adult heels, for example. I enjoyed solving problems and my small town upbringing provided plenty of opportunities for me to grow my problem-solving muscle.

In hindsight, I believe my earliest memories were marked by being of service to others and making a positive impact in my community.

What are your fields of interest in water and what motivated your choices?

I came across geology by chance in my second year at university after having started with biological sciences. I wanted to be of impact in a way that aligned with my personality, and I came to hydrogeology only after working as a geologist in mining. Now as a professional, science communication and water security are priorities.

With the global climate crisis, it is in our best interest to communicate the complex science of water in a clear relatable way. I have witnessed my hometown transition from having water run through a tap with the same amount of certainty that the sun will rise tomorrow, to getting hard water and now dry taps. I hope that communicating scientific findings and solutions in a clear and relatable way to policy makers, decision makers and citizens alike will enable us to act with the urgency required.

Who are the monumental people that nurtured your path to being a hydrogeologist?

My parents were instrumental in nurturing my path to being an earth scientist: from entertaining my arts and crafts and the science activity books I went through; to paying for any extramural class I identified to keep me at the top of my class.

I have also had several mentors who have introduced me to their professional circles and opened up world of possibilities I wouldn't have discovered on my own.

What are your reflections of being a woman in earth science?

Being a woman in the earth sciences excites me because the work I do speaks directly to the values I hold as a woman and humanitarian. It stimulates my curiosity because science is not fixed, so it allows for me to dream and be creative.

Science caters for my innovative and problem solving energy and constantly keeps me moving past the fences of my previous challenges in life and work.

In terms of access, what do you imagine needs to be in place to nurture and especially retain women in earth science?

Women face a lot of bias in the earth sciences that men do not have to contend with - whether it is her ability to switch from heels to safety boots or work long weeks away from home. To retain women in the earth sciences women should be afforded the opportunity to thrive as is evidenced in the way women do work in other life area. Women need to be afforded the space to being fully themselves. The only limitation to a woman's professional success should be her personal ambition, not somebody else's bias.

