

18twenty8 to launch Big Sister Network Summit in Joburg

 By [Sandy Peters](#)

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Refiloe Seseane is the founder of [18twenty8](#), a non-profit organisation that aims to empower young women through educational and personal development. One of its main programmes is its Big Sister Network which matches educated, professional women established in their respective careers with mentees who need positive, female role models who can offer concrete advice for their future success.



Refiloe Seseane, founder, 18twenty8

18twenty8 will be launching its Big Sister Network Summit this year, which will provide a platform for inter-generational dialogue and mutual learning between Big Sisters and their Little Sisters, and will feature presentations by high profile speakers sharing their life stories.

We chatted to Seseane this Women's Month to find out more about her background, what inspired the launch of 18twenty8, and what attendees of the inaugural Big Sister Network Summit can expect.

Could you tell us a bit more about yourself, your background?

I was actually born in Pretoria but my birth certificate says Benoni! I grew up everywhere – on my maternal grandparents' farm in a semi-rural town called Tsolo in the Transkei (Eastern Cape province) and with my paternal grandmother in Wattville township in Benoni (Gauteng province). My parents raised my siblings and I in Vosloorus township (also in the Gauteng province) before moving to the suburbs of Benoni. So that is why I am a proud “Benoni girl” and my birth certificate says I was born there.

Academically, my qualifications are in economics and finance. I graduated with distinction in economics from my BCom degree at Unisa. I also hold a postgraduate (Honours) degree in economics from Unisa and was the top graduate in the Management Advancement Programme at Wits Business School before completing a Postgraduate Certificate in Financial Economics at Cardiff University in Wales. My talents lie in acting, public speaking and voice-over work and I have been blessed to work with SA's finest on soaps like Generations, Rhythm City and The Wild.

I love jazz and am very excited that my favourite musician, Wynton Marsalis, will be performing in South Africa next month.

What inspired you to start 18twenty8?

The idea to start 18twenty8 came to me in October 2008. I was 28 years old at the time and I reflected upon the previous ten years of my life, what I had achieved professionally, academically and emotionally since completing high school at the age of 18. I felt that I would have gone much further if I had had someone mentoring and supporting me. So, at 28, I decided to provide the support that I didn't have when I was 18 to other young women. That is what inspired the name 18twenty8. We registered in January 2011.



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■ **What kind of support does 18twenty8 offer young women?**

18twenty8 is an award-winning, women-led non-profit organisation that empowers young women between the ages of 18 and 28 from disadvantaged backgrounds by developing strategies for their educational and personal development. We encourage young women to view higher education as an attractive and necessary tool for their empowerment. Our approach remains empathetic, skills-enhancing and relevant to the young women we serve because we have experienced some of their challenges first-hand. Our vision is the permanent transformation of the lives of girls and young women through four interventions:

1. Interactive life-skills workshops for girls in grade 11 and grade 12 at high schools in marginalised communities.
2. A mentorship programme called The Big Sister Network that matches our beneficiaries to professional women for mentoring support and career exposure both during and after their undergraduate studies. In addition to financial constraints, the lack of positive female role models and academic mentors, within families and the broader community, is commonly cited as contributing to high university drop-out rates, general despondency or a lack of direction in the lives of our beneficiaries. We will be hosting a Big Sister Network event in Johannesburg on Saturday, 5 October 2019.
3. Providing financial assistance, through corporate fundraising, for young women to cover the full costs of any undergraduate degree at any university of their choice. Most of our beneficiaries are the first in their families to complete grade 12 - let alone enrol at university. Campaigns like #FeesmustFall demonstrate that university education remains prohibitively expensive for the majority of South African students. We have many examples of young women who are academically competent but forced to stay at home while they apply for funding or entry-level jobs in order to earn an income to pay for their undergraduate education. This causes frustration and unnecessary delays for their educational attainment and personal development.

Through our Financial Assistance Programme we fundraise to cover tuition fees, textbooks, accommodation, a monthly living allowance and laptop. Consistent with our mission to produce leaders in all sectors of the economy, we have funded the full undergraduate degree costs of young women in the following fields: Education, Law, Economics, Computer Science, Sociology, Accounting, Construction Engineering, Biological Science, and Entrepreneurship.

4. A leadership development programme that provides tools for undergraduate young women to deal with the demands of life both on and off campus. Our leadership development programme is a new intervention that we will be launching through a weekend camp in September 2019 (from Friday 27 September to Sunday 29 September).

We are dedicated to producing successive generations of educated female leaders in South Africa who will not only ensure that the workforce is more gender equal and equitable, but will be equipped to tackle the many economic, social and political challenges facing our country.



■ **How do you measure 18twenty8's success?**

We are only as successful as people allow us to be. Our most important indicators of success, therefore, are the relationships that we foster with all our stakeholder groups and we remain grateful to them. It would not have been possible to reach the girls and young women whose lives we have positively impacted without our stakeholders' support.

We have impacted 5,000 girls in grade 11 and 12 through various life-skills workshops that we have run independently and through partnerships over the past decade; The Big Sister Network has reached 50 Little Sisters and their Big Sisters; our Financial Assistance Programme has produced eight university graduates (and counting). We aim to positively impact 200 undergraduate young women through our leadership development camp in September 2019.

■ **Tell us more about the Big Sister Network Summit set to launch in October.**

The summit is a one-day event, to be held on Saturday 5 October in Johannesburg, where updates on various mentoring relationships will be shared. It provides a platform for inter-generational dialogue and mutual learning between Big Sisters (mentors) and their Little Sisters (mentees). Attendees will network with like-minded women and there will be presentations and panel group discussions with high-profile speakers. Our beneficiaries will learn from leading women who will give direction, clarity and focus to help them achieve their personal, academic and professional goals. We are very excited about our Big Sister Network Summit!



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■ **Is there a female figure that has had a positive influence on your life?**

My mother.

■ **What is your message for Women's Month?**

Make sure that girls wear clothing that doesn't have hooks, zips or buttons at the back so that they don't grow up dependent

on others for something as simple as dressing themselves.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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