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Failure was not an option, and yet it was such an integral part of my journey. The phrase “adversity breeds success” resonates with me on a fundamental level. Grit, determination, courage, vulnerability and hard work are also key to a successful journey, and I thank God that I am blessed (i) to recognise that these qualities are ingrained in my DNA and I just need to access them, and (ii) that I also had the courage and resilience to endure the challenges life presented to me, both personally and professionally.

Much of my journey has been kindly presented in another article in this same edition, written by Ansarada (thank you, Ansarada, for your support) so I will share more specifically about what winning the award for DealMaker of the Year 2021 means to me and our industry (from my perspective), and I will do my best to impart some thoughts to young people coming up through this industry and, actually, anyone else I may reach.

It is factually evident that people who look like/similar to me and/or with similar backgrounds are not your typical front runners in this cut-throat M&A world. This does not, in any manner or form or other conceivable way, mean that WE are not capable. Far from it, we are actually almost always simply underestimated and not afforded equal opportunities to prove our worth. Being underestimated was always one of the sharpest swords in my arsenal. Diversity,

The Audacity of Inspiration

transformation, gender biases, pay-gaps and inequalities are all currently front of mind for most rational beings globally. Much has been said and written on the topics and I will do my best to avoid repeating that information. Not because it is not important, but rather as it is not the focus of this article. Instead, I seek to inspire with my perspective, and I hope that this story inspires all who hear it, not just women.

Some time in February 2021, whilst we were still under some form of lockdown and still navigating COVID-19 restrictions, I received the email announcing the shortlisted nominees for DealMaker of the Year 2020 and there it was, my name (long, hyphenated surname) amongst others (only male). I was sitting at my home desk in Cape Town at the time. I will admit to reading the email a few times; I was in mild shock. The support from family, friends and colleagues came flooding in. It was overwhelming and I was caught up in it.

Fast forward to the awards evening at the end of February 2021 (held virtually thanks to COVID), I didn’t win, and it felt like a gut punch for so many reasons. Many were convinced that the judges had missed their opportunity to make a historical decision that the industry needed and perhaps craved. I had mixed emotions, but paramount was a deep sense of disappointment. You see, 2020 was one of the hardest years for humankind and equally so for me. We all collectively dealt with immense loss, grief, sadness and the imposition of restrictions on our liberties. Our futures were uncertain. It was, paradoxically, also one of the most successful years of my career. There was a lot of pressure on me to keep the team motivated, moving forward and also ensuring that I did my best to pick up the slack so we all didn’t fall apart (we had our moments and those who know, know). WE WORKED! Everyone pulled together with unbelievable slickness. My team are simply superstars. I was also

very disappointed, as I felt that me not winning meant that I had let the team down. However, I quickly processed the failure and disappointment and moved forward, but something stuck with me... it was a comment that the judges made that year, and it went something like this: “Lydia is a future winner”. My only thought on this was that 2020 was such a stellar year, and for me to be able to repeat that would be a tall order. It felt like too much pressure to focus on that so, instead, I made a conscious decision not to focus on winning awards, and to just get back to the knitting and to what I enjoyed. To be honest, I believed that this was my only shot. I created my own ceiling (something I learnt about in Matthew McConaughey’s book Greenlights). Anyway, I had a lot of work to do. The team needed my focus, and so did my clients and the transactions before me, and I just got on with it, with awards far back in my mind. Who knew? 2021 was even more successful than 2020. We all felt privilege and blessed.

Fast forward again to early 2022; I received the same email, with the shortlisted nominees for DealMaker of the Year 2021 and, once again, there was my long, hyphenated name. This time round, I closed the email and tried my best to forget about it; but I am human, (contrary to popular belief) and I certainly gave it some thought. Just for some context, I was only the third woman to be a shortlisted finalist in the history of the awards. The first was Basani Maluleke in 2008 and Angela Simpson in 2010.

Come the evening of 22 February 2022, I was named DealMaker of the Year for 2021 at a lovely in-person gala evening in Sandton, and my first reaction was disbelief, and then a sense of relief that we finally did it. The first woman to do so and to break the ranks and shatter the glass ceiling. As Samira Hassanally of ABSA so eloquently put it in a message to me, “I hear the crunch of glass as you smash through those ceilings” – this was the best description to describe



This award is dedicated to my Mum, who passed on in 1990 and to my Dad, who passed on in 2022 (this is still very fresh). To my Mum, you set the foundational values in place, and to my Dad, as you said in your own words, you let me fly.

Thank you DealMakers, for shining a light on this incredible industry. 

that moment. Of course, it should have happened sooner; that is, a woman should have taken this award much sooner than 2022 and, of course, there were and are many deserving stellar women in our industry.

So, what does it mean to me? It is a great personal and professional achievement. I consider it a privilege, that I was able to bring it home and finish lighting the trail that was already set ablaze by so many great women in this industry. I salute each of you and each of the phenomenal women in my team.

What does this mean for the industry? It means that we are making progress, albeit slow, but let's pause and acknowledge the moment and the progress. It also means that young women in this industry have tangible hope and will know that these types of awards are within their reach, as they now have a face who looks similar to them who has achieved it.

The path is lit, the ceiling is shattered, including the one I created myself, and I will do my best to mentor young people, enable others who look similar to me and/or who come from similar backgrounds to realise their full potential and to understand that you deserve a seat at the table; you deserve and are entitled to play on the same field.

I still have a long way to go, a lot to learn and a lot to offer. See you on the next transaction.

What have I learnt in my time thus far?

- 1) Keep your head and don't focus on the noise; its only purpose is to distract you.
- 2) Give your best in all you do – sometimes you have to dig deep, but you will rarely regret doing so.
- 3) Winning is important, but do not become obsessed with it or desperate for it, because obsession and desperation are antidotes to winning. Rather put your head down and get on with it; the wins will come.
- 4) If something feels off, it generally is, so question things and do not accept anything at face value.
- 5) Ask for what you want and work for it – don't expect it to be handed to you.
- 6) Pray and make your own luck.
- 7) We all make mistakes. Admit your mistakes when they happen and do your best to fix them.
- 8) Be courageous and bold – fortune favours the brave.
- 9) Don't be afraid to be vulnerable and show yourself – yes, some people will take advantage of it, but it's much better for you in the long run.
- 10) We all deserve a space in this world – we are all human, made of the same fibres and have the same fears and anxieties – some just hide it better.
- 11) Success is in all of us – you just need to want it.
- 12) I have come to understand that people are our greatest assets.
- 13) Roll with the punches because, goodness knows, the punches will come.
- 14) I serve my clients (to all of whom I'm ever grateful) and my team, and I find immense joy and reward in that.
- 15) Eminem* was right and wrong – right in that you should "lose yourself in the music", but wrong in that you don't only get "one shot, one opportunity to seize everything you ever wanted in one moment". Opportunity does come more than once in a lifetime.

*Eminem is widely regarded as having broken racial barriers for the acceptance of white rappers in popular music.