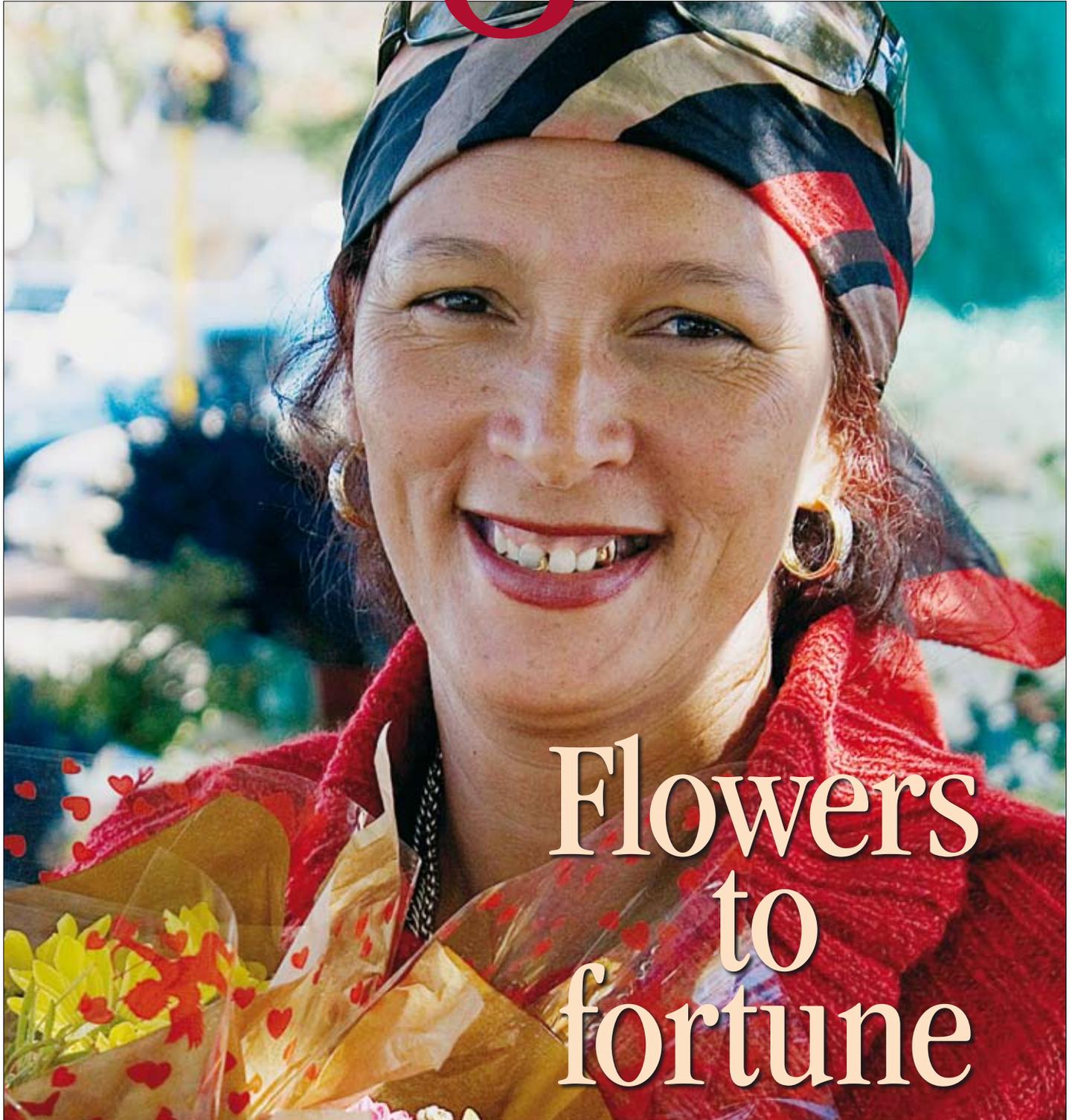


Village Life

NO 24 • JUNE / JULY 2007 ■ R25,00 INCL VAT

JOURNAL OF PEOPLE ■ NATURE ■ HISTORY ■ ARTS



Flowers to fortune

ISSN 1810-5580



9 771810 558005

NUMBER

24

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From *flower-seller* to businesswoman

By Annalize Mouton

"This is where my heart is and always will be," says Suraya Cassiem (42) pointing to her flower stall under the three pin oaks in York Street, George. Today she no longer needs to sell flowers on the street herself, but grows and exports proteas, supplies flowers to a supermarket chain, and is also venturing into property development. It seems a long time since she started selling flowers at age seven like her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother before her.

Suraya's earliest memories are of her mother, Darawiesa Africa, and her father, Riedwaan (Boeja) Africa, waking them up before four on Friday and Saturday mornings to sell flowers. Her elder sister stayed at home to look after the other little ones and to cook food for the family, although she was so small that she had to stand on a case to reach the pots on top of the old coal stove. In their ramshackle old bakkie loaded with buckets of flowers, Suraya and her parents drove from Grassy Park to Parow, and eventually also to Goodwood when the town council gave Darawiesa another stall there, in front of the old Liberty Bioscope. While her mother minded the stall, Suraya and her father, each with a basket of flowers on their shoulders, went from shop to shop, barefooted Suraya on one side of the street and her father on the other. "Flowers, Master. Flowers, Mèrim. Buy a bunch, my Master. It's for my Mamma to buy us food."

"Life was tough then," remarks Suraya. "We only knew we were selling flowers." Her mother's father, who had a white mother, owned a piece of land in Grassy Park where he once kept horses. He had converted part of the old stables into living quarters for his daughter's family.

In the early 1970s when Suraya was about eleven years old they started selling flowers in Stellenbosch. Before that Suraya only sold flowers on Fridays and Saturdays, but now she did it every day. She had passed standard one and could write her name. What else Suraya needed to know, her mother said, she would teach



Suraya at the time she was selling flowers in Stellenbosch

her. While her father was selling flowers on the campus of the university, Suraya went from shop to shop and from person to person. A couple of times during the day she would take her earnings to her mother and return with more flowers. The flowers not sold during the day were sold in front of the bar at night. "What I

saw and heard there in front of the bar is nobody's business," Suraya recalls. Chaps were often rude to her on their way in, but bought flowers when they came out after a few drinks.

But the owners of flower shops in Stellenbosch did not take kindly to the newcomers and started complaining to the municipality. Time and again the municipal inspectors would chase them out of the town "like dogs", says Suraya. "Later my father instructed me that should the 'traffics' catch me, I was not to tell them where my parents were waiting for me in a back street. I prayed to God that the inspectors would leave me alone, and that I would sell many flowers." The day came when one of the inspectors, a certain Mr van Niekerk, had had enough. He commanded Suraya to come with him. "I am tired of all this," he said. "I chase you out of the town and you keep on coming back." Very scared Suraya asked, "Sir, what are you going to do to me? Put me in jail?" He wrote a letter and handed it to her, asking, "Can you read?" "No, Sir." "Can you write?" "No, Sir." "Now how do you know how much change to give to people?" Suraya told him what her mother had taught her – a big coin (R5) paid for one bunch of flowers, a green note for two and a brown note for four. "Tell your parents I want to see them in my office tomorrow," he said when he dropped her off at the post office and told her to wait there for her parents. Once he was out of sight, Suraya was selling her flowers again. Only when she had sold every bunch did she run to her parents with the letter.

STUDIO LOCKLEY



Suraya's parents, Riedwaan (Boeja) and Darawiesa Africa and (top) the stall in George

The next day Mr van Niekerk told them the municipality had decided to give them a stall in town! "And," says Suraya, "they gave us the best place in town – on the main road in the thoroughfare between Standard Bank and De Wet's, the biggest shop then." Wearing a white apron, Suraya minded the stall while her parents collected more flowers from farms in the area. At night when they picked Suraya up she always wanted to know if she had done well, because she had "tried her level best" and did exactly what her mother taught her – to not let "a master or mêmrim pass her without selling them flowers". Each time she received the same

answer, "No, my child, you did not do too well. You must try harder." She knew full well that every night there was more and more money in her apron pocket, but nevertheless resolved to try even harder the next day.

In her early twenties, she married and after a while felt she needed a new challenge. Like the students she had seen from their first year through to graduation and then starting to work, it was time for her to apply what she had learnt. She wanted to go with her brother to Bloemfontein where he was selling proteas.

Initially her parents opposed her idea, but eventually Suraya accompanied her

brother's team to Bloemfontein, with two delivery vans stocked with proteas. Her husband and baby stayed behind. It was her first trip away from home and at Beaufort West she asked her brother. "Now where is this place, Bloemfontein? When will we be there?" They had to drive through the night and arrived in Bloemfontein the next day.

Her brother dropped her off under a tree in Maitland Street, the main road, with loads of proteas and four young male street vendors. He continued to Welkom with the other van and would pick her up in the evening. Much to Suraya's surprise she did extremely well and judging by the well-dressed people, both white and black, she new there was money to be made in Bloemfontein. To her family's dismay she decided to stay in Bloemfontein. Suraya slept in the van and made use of public toilets for her ablutions. "I was taking a fat chance, but I asked my mother to order me flowers from Johannesburg and bought more buckets, exactly as I had seen my mother do for all those years." She had been there for two weeks when trouble started.

It was as if the whole of Bloemfontein had turned against her – the florists, the police, the "traffics" (municipal inspectors). "It was in the mid-eighties, before Mr Mandela was set free," recalls Suraya. "But, I said to myself, I am going nowhere. This time I won't let myself be chased by anybody." And that was exactly what she said when they told her to go back to the Cape. "No Master, I am staying right here. Cape Town has a flower market, Durban

has a flower market, Jo'burg has one. You say you are the City of Roses, but where is your flower market? No, Master, I am going nowhere."

She applied for a trading licence and at the same time bought a house with money from her mother. But the florists still wanted Suraya out of Bloemfontein. Early one Friday morning, she noticed a group of white men nearing her stall. "Boys," she said to her vendors, "here comes trouble. Keep yourselves busy. Take brooms and sweep the stall." They were the "main guys", the Town Council, and they told Suraya to be at a meeting at one o'clock that day; they would then decide whether she could stay or not.

Suraya realised this was "make it or break it day." She phoned her mother and asked her to pray "really hard". "My child, you're a fortunate one. You know that wherever you go you will not only survive, but do well. I'm not even the least worried, so don't you worry," was her mother's reply.

She bought a new dress, and asked a friend to put make-up on her face and do her hair, and then set off to the meeting. Putting on a brave face, she watched how each of the 21 councillors was sizing her up. She thought, "Today you will be deciding over my future, but I am not going to be scared of you. I will trust in my Lord to soften your hearts." Ten voted in favour of her, eleven against, but before they could announce the outcome of the vote, the door opened. A man entered, looked at Suraya, she looked back at him and when she stood up, he exclaimed, "Suraya, is it really you?"

With tears streaming down her cheeks, she walked over to him and embraced him in front of them all. "Oh Lord, Master, thank you. You know me." This man, now an "important" man on the Town Council, used to be one of the inspectors who chased her out of Stellenbosch. He said to the Council, "Sirs, I do not know what you have decided, but I'll tell you this. This girl is here to stay. I know her well, saw her growing up. If you would allow her, she will do something beautiful for this city." Suraya could not resist saying to them, "I told you so. But thank you nevertheless, my Masters."

The issue was settled and Suraya stayed in Bloemfontein. Eventually they built her a lovely stall in the heart of the business

*"This girl is here to stay.
If you allow her to, she will
do something beautiful for
Bloemfontein"*

centre. Every end of the month Darawiesa visited her daughter. The first time she visited, she was shocked at what little furniture Suraya had; for curtains she had pegged cheap sheets to the curtain rails. She often wondered what the people in this smart neighbourhood thought of this "Capey" and her bunch of "boyjtjies" (who all grew up with Suraya and were like her bodyguard). For more than twelve years Suraya sold flowers in Bloemfontein. She worked hard, very hard, and through the hardships she earned what she termed her "Bachelor's degree in Life". The honour for her success she gives to God, the people – white, coloured and black – who supported her all these years, and most importantly, her parents, Riedwaan Africa and Darawiesa Davids. Although she looks like her late father whom she dearly

but as in Stellenbosch and Bloemfontein, she again ended up with the biggest stall in town and was selling flowers every day of the week.

One day in 2001 while she and her father, who was visiting her, were sitting under the oaks selling flowers, she said to him, "Boeja, I will be married for almost twenty years soon. And, although I have worked throughout my entire life, I have never received a wage package." She had been hearing of tenders given to people for all kinds of things, and why could she not get one? As she had risen from her prayer carpet that morning she knew that she had to look for a tender from the government. She asked her father to mind the stall, and with her husband she went to consult a friend working for the government.

As soon as the friend saw Suraya she said they had just then been talking of her. Would she provide the flowers for the minister's visit and attend the function herself? Reluctantly she agreed and that day exchanged her customary head scarf and apron for a stylish white outfit.

It was the first function she ever attended. Her friend showed her to her seat right at the front, next to three coloured men. While waiting for the minister to arrive she overheard one saying to the other, "Today the minister must give us money for a farm and tractors." She could not believe what she was hearing, and eventually turned to the man and asked, "Excuse me, but did I hear you correctly? Did you say the minister must give you farms and tractors?" They explained.

When Mr Ebrahim

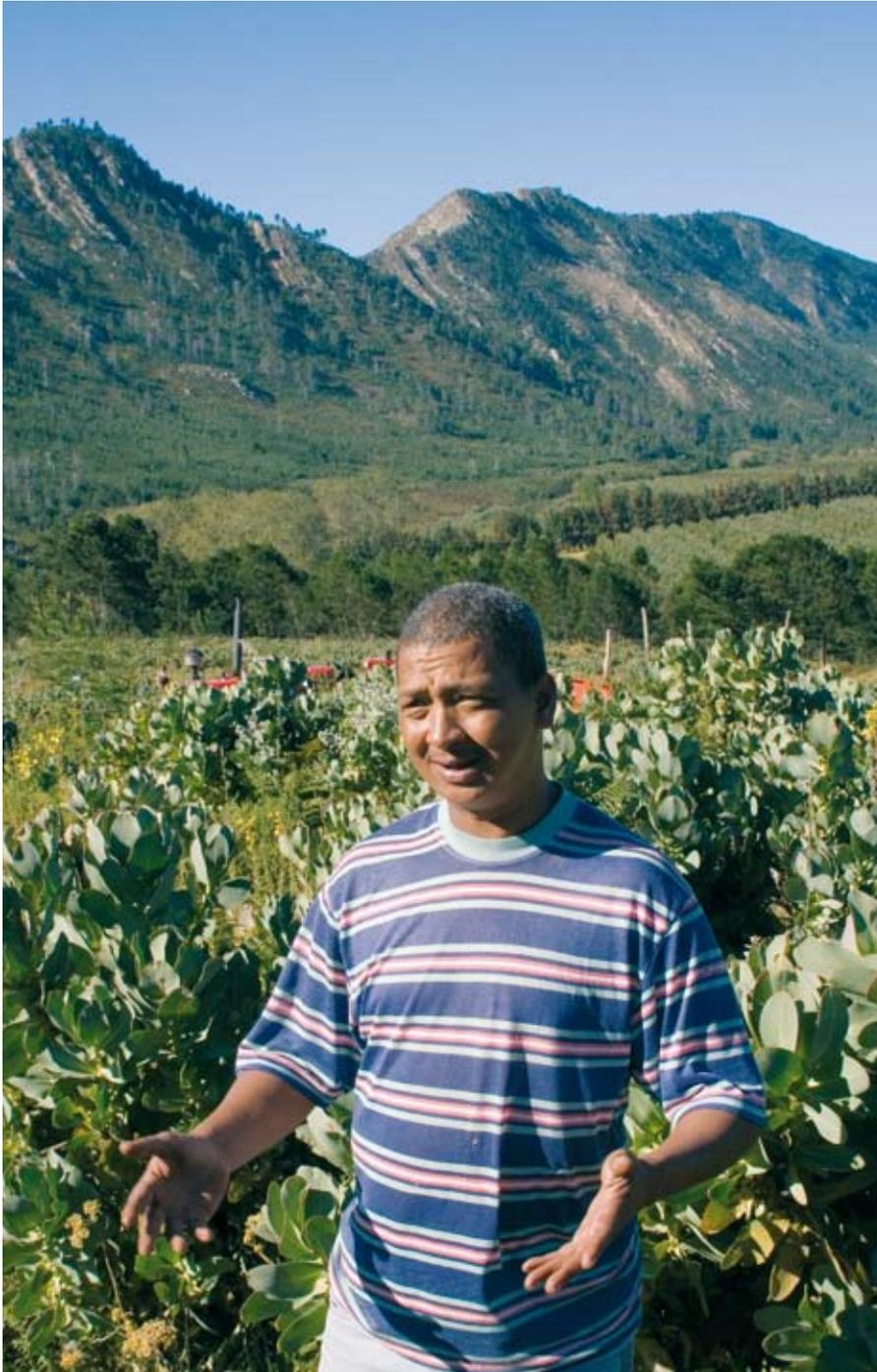
Rasool, current premier of the Western Cape, then the Minister of Finance and Agriculture, entered, Suraya's friend brought him directly to her and introduced Suraya as George's only black entrepreneur. The minister outlined government funding schemes for black farmers, and during the tea break came to Suraya and questioned her on her roots and family (both were Muslims and at the time observing a fast). It turned out that their grandfathers had known each other well. "But your people are very hard-working," remarked the minister. That's when Suraya heard herself say, "Oh Lord, yes, we work very hard. I am so tired. Does the minister not have a small piece of land somewhere for me where I can grow my own flowers?" He handed her his card and



Suraya and brother Yusif at her home in Pacaltsdorp

loved and describes as a good, gentle man, she takes after her mother. Darawiesa is a very strong woman, with a lot of drive, yet a soft heart. What Suraya learned about business she credits to her mother.

After twelve years Suraya, her husband and three children went back to Cape Town for a short while before she moved again, this time to George. Her brother had told her she should sell her flowers under the three trees in York Street. "Again I took fat chances, but Mr Mandela was now released from prison and free enterprise was the new word on everybody's lips. When I asked someone what it meant, they told me I could do whatever I want. So, that was precisely what I did." Again she had to fight the municipality,



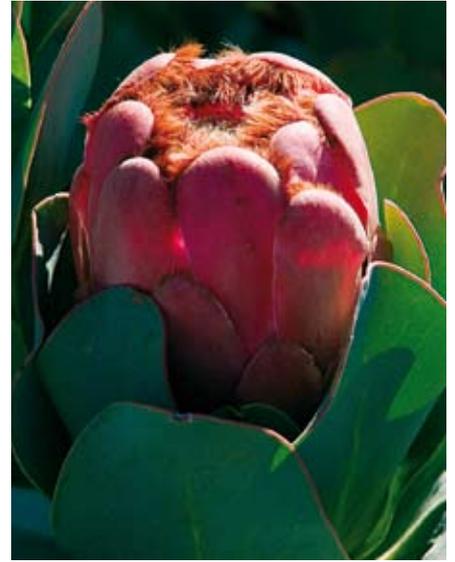
Suraya's brother Ali among the proteas on the farm Bo-Molen River

told her to go to the Land Bank and ask if they had any land available.

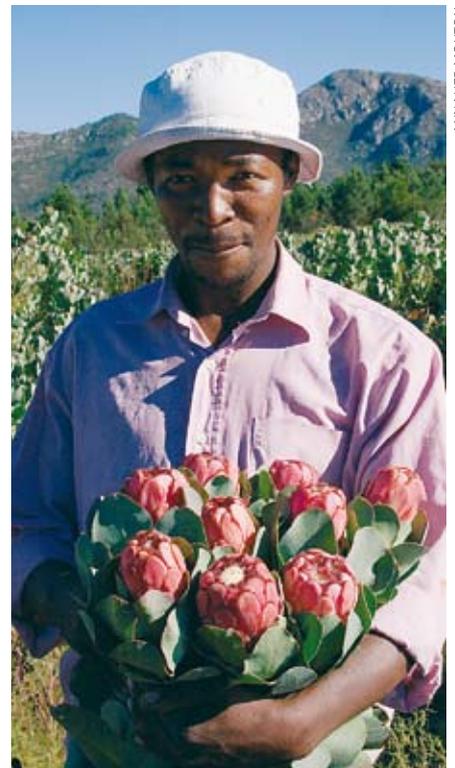
She and her father went to the Land Bank in George to see the manager, a Mrs Barry. Mrs Barry was incredulous, but Suraya persisted and eventually was told that the bank had a repossessed protea farm, Bo-Molen River, about 70 kilometres from George in the Langkloof. She gave Suraya directions and the following morning they went to look at the farm. When Suraya told the lady of the house that they were sent by the Land Bank to look at the property, she almost exploded. "You what? Are you trying to tell me you're buying this property? Don't waste my time." And with that she slammed the door in their faces. Suraya stayed calm,

and eventually the owner told the maid rather rudely to show the visitors around.

They met the farm manager and he showed them the extent of the farm. Suraya was completely overwhelmed: a total of 1 070 hectares with 50 hectares under proteas. Although totally overgrown after years of neglect, Boeja immediately saw that the *Protea grandiceps* were "export proteas". Back at the Land Bank Suraya told Mrs Barry that they wanted the farm, and with trepidation asked the price. "Seven million rand, but it has now been put out for R700 000," they were told. "Boeja, where am I ever going to get that kind of money? I will have to sell my little house," she said to her father. Mrs Barry laughed and asked how many



The *Protea grandiceps* grown for export



Farm "right-hand man" Ewert Ekstraal

people were in their family. They were ten: her parents, herself and seven more. Mrs Barry asked her to get all their IDs and then they could do it the LRAD way. (The Land Redistribution and Agricultural Development grant assists families or communities to acquire land for agricultural purposes. The proponents are required to make a matching contribution that could include labour, capital, stock or other loans.)

They phoned her mother who thought Suraya, with father and all, was crazy. She was not going to put up her house in the Cape as surety, and she sent her eldest son to find out what his sister was up to. Her father phoned the same son and told him to bring spades and pickaxes with him.

“Sir, we arrive on foot, but let me tell you now, we shall leave in a Rolls-Royce!”

▶ In George Mrs Barry assured him that no houses were going to be taken, and with that assurance the Africa family took the plunge and applied for a LRAD grant and a R200 000 Land Bank loan. Sadly, in late 2003 shortly before they moved to the farm, Riedwaan Africa died.

Rumours about the coloured woman from the Cape who had bought the old historic farm with the Government's support spread far and wide. They received permission to start clearing and pruning the proteas out of their own pockets and at their own risk. The day Suraya arrived on the farm with a team of thirty workers, the previous owner was still living in the farmstead. En route one of the neighbours who also wanted the farm stopped them and very rudely asked who they were and where they thought they were going. Suraya was forewarned. “If you tell me who you are I will tell you who I am.” He introduced himself and she told him she was his new neighbour. He threateningly told them that the Langkloof was a hard country and he had seen people arrive in Rolls Royces and leave on foot. Not at a loss for words, Suraya replied, “Sir, we arrive on foot, but let me tell you now, we shall leave in a Rolls Royce!” She could not resist adding, “And just to remind you, you are now trespassing on our land.”

His animosity and their lack of implements did not deter them. Suraya used her old bakkie as a bushcutter to make tracks between the rows of proteas. “I tell you, convicts had it easier than us. We worked

very hard. My mother, who was in her early sixties then, my brothers, everyone of us.” They worked the land by hand, from early morning to late at night. Money they had saved over the years was ploughed into the land and every Friday her mother forked out the R7 000 to pay the workers. One day Suraya had had enough and went over to the neighbour and asked to borrow one of his tractors. “Go ask Mandela for a tractor,” he replied. She enquired about the possibility of obtaining a tractor and was directed to the head of the Western Cape department of agriculture at Elsenburg. Three weeks later Suraya had what she wanted.

The Department of Land Affairs also made a consultant available to assist them in drafting a business plan and they then succeeded in obtaining more funds to upgrade the infrastructure, clear the overgrowth, and to buy tools and equipment. They still receive ongoing assistance from a horticulturist and from the provincial department of agriculture, who also funded the building of a packing store and basic office facilities.

In 2005 Suraya was named the top female export farmer in the Western Cape and the business has been nominated as one of the top new export companies in

the province. In the same year she was also awarded a contract worth millions of Rands exporting to the Netherlands. She plans to expand her farming operation by planting and producing roses and wants to become the top protea grower and exporter in the province.

They worked very hard to earn the respect of the government, says Suraya. Her two brothers, Ali and Yusif, who had previously both worked on protea and other flower farms at Kleinmond and Stanford, now manage the farm and the packing/transport respectively. They employ 30 permanent workers and 40 seasonal workers. Ten million flowers are produced per year with a truckload of proteas and bouquets exported to Europe every second day from Cape Town – approximately 8 000 bouquets and 20 000 proteas at a time. Funding has been received to put one hectare under cover for a nursery for roses or other flowers, which will also be destined for the export market. Plans for vegetable gardens and the planting of strawberries are in an advanced stage, and walking trails and eco-tourism facilities are planned on the mountainous, uncultivated parts of the farm.

Suraya now has a personal assistant who attends to her appointments and e-mail. She owns houses in George (one is used as her offices), and is involved in a new commercial building project (she chairs Eden Women in Construction). The little flower seller has come a long way, but she is clearly just starting! ■



IMARE MOUTON

The house on Bo-Molen River has been declared a national monument. The remains of an old water-mill is also still to be seen on the farm