

## KARABO MAKWENA

**Date:** 26 April 2011  
**Place:** Marion Island  
**Interviewer(Q):** Dora Scott | C-I-B Antarctic Legacy Project | Stellenbosch University  
**Respondent(A):** Karabo Makwena | Meteorologist | Marion 67 | 2010

**Q** Yes, so tell me what is your team number and the year

**A:** Team number is 67.

**Q** Yes

**A:** 2010 from April

**Q** Okay.

**A:** Last year.

**Q** To now, to 2011. Okay and you are a Metkassie?

**A:** I am a Metkassie, yes.

**Q** Brilliant. So how did it happen that you applied to come here?

**A:** [laugh] Actually it is a very interesting story.

**Q** Oh.

**A:** There was a guy. He was friends with my sister

**Q** Yes.

**A:** My other sister, because I have two sisters.

**Q** Yes.

**A:** So he told my sister that he is leaving for a year and...

**Q** Coming here

**A:** And he is going to Marion Island, yes. So he came back, I think he was here in 2002, 2003. His is Phineas, forget his surname. So, ja, when he got back he told my sister how interesting it was, and my other sister got interested in that.

**Q** Yes.

**A:** And he gave her all the details and people to contact and she sent her CV and they called her interviews, like the same way they did it with me. And then she came here in 2005.

**Q** Oh.

**A:** Yes. And then she came back in 2006, and then she told me about it as well, and she gave me pictures and all those stuff. And then after I got my diploma, she said, "Why don't you go and apply for it, because I still have the contact details for the people", and this is like four years later.

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** After she got back and she was like, "Apply for this", and then I just tried it out, because

I was not working at that time.

Q: Yes.

A: I just graduated and, you know. So I applied and [laugh], immediately they called me for interviews and I did well, and, *ja*.

Q: Brilliantly, wow.

A: Oh yeah. [laugh]

Q: So what did your sister do?

A: She is a psychologist. She studied industrial psychology.

Q: Okay.

A: *Ja*.

Q: And what did she do on the island?

A: She was a Metkassie as well.

Q: Oh, okay. [laugh] Nice.

A: So I mean we are doing things that are totally different from, well, from what we are doing right now.

Q: And what did you study?

A: I studied IT.

Q: Okay.

A: *Ja*. So it is completely different, [laugh], to this, but I am actually not interested in it anymore.

Q: No? [laugh]. Okay well, you have to stop somewhere.

A: *Ja*, [laugh] so I don't know.

Q: I know your sister told you a bit about the place, but what did you know? What did she tell you before you came here?

A: Not much though, hey? She used to tell me about the terrain and how cold it is. It is all she told me, and she told me, she gave me some hints on how to do my work, and stuff like that. How to be, to behave and stuff like that.

Q: Okay.

A: She didn't really give me much information about the island itself.

Q: Okay.

A: *Ja*, she just told me about her experiences here and, you know, how much she enjoyed it. And then seeing from the pictures I got interested as well.

Q: Nice.

A: *Ja*.

Q: Now describe the team preparations you had last year, before you came here.

A: You mean team training?

Q: *Ja*.

A: Okay. Oh that was awesome hey? [laugh]. We did first-aid, which is interesting as well, it was really good. My first time doing first-aid, so I enjoyed it a lot. And then we did fire-training.

Q: Oh, fire-fighting.

A: Fire-fighting, yes. Fire-fighting, we did that as well. Which was awesome, it was the best. [laugh]. *Ja*, they made it very realistic, you know? Like these little caves and stuff, smoke and whatever. So *ja*, so they showed us how to wear a vest, and very good experience, I really enjoyed it. And I really liked the team. The team was awesome at the time. It's very nice.

Q: Cool, so this is in Cape Town, right?

A: This was in Cape Town, yes.

Q: And do you think the preparations were sufficient for what you had to face on the island? You think they prepared you enough?

A: We had limited time that is the thing. I am sure they would have gotten into more detail about what we were doing there, but our time was not enough to do all that. But I think it was enough to, I could put out a fire now. [laugh] And also I think that was the main idea ...

Q: *Ja*.

A: To just be able to put out a fire and, well there is different types of flames...

Q: Yes.

A: Which extinguisher to use for a type of flame that is the kind of stuff they taught us. So I think it was pretty much, okay.

Q: Okay.

A: *Ja*.

Q: And what preparations did you make specifically for job as Metkassie?

A: There was a met-training actually.

Q: Yes.

A: Which lasted for two months, which was it tough hey, you had to study, write tests every second day, you had to get like 75% for each test, so you had to study very hard, especially for me, because I had no meteorology background...

Q: Background.

A: Or anything. So *ja*, so, it was a little tough but...

Q: Did you do everything from scratch?

A: From scratch, yeah, you need to learn all the clouds, the codings, weather codes, everything, you know? It was just a whole lot of work, *ja*. But it was worth it, you know?

**Q:** Brilliant. Now, did you take the Agulhas down?

**A:** Yes, took the Agulhas.

**Q:** Do you remember who the captain was?

**A:** Oh I forgot hey! I didn't meet him. [laugh]. Didn't meet him, no, not a lot of people met him actually. You know? He did not come out a lot.

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** *Ja*. So, I don't really remember who he was.

**Q:** And what do you remember about the journey down?

**A:** Well the journey down was pretty chilled, you know. Because the people were a little shy as well, you know? We did not talk much, you know, we were still a little thick. The ice wasn't broken that much yet, you know? But, I enjoyed it though. There was a guy who I used to chill with. His name was Tsegale. He was the team leader for the MET team, for us.

**Q:** Oh, for the previous team?

**A:** No, no, no.

**Q:** Oh, for the trip down.

**A:** *Ja*.

**Q:** The takeover.

**A:** *Ja*. He was the guy who was going to supervise everything.

**Q:** Oh, okay.

**A:** So he works at SAWS[Weather Service].

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** *Ja*, him and I grew up very far from each other, so you know? We had a lot in common, and I used to spend a lot of time with him. *Ja*. I enjoyed the trip down.

**Q:** Good. Did you get seasick?

**A:** No, I didn't actually. I took this slow pill that they gave me, and it worked.

**Q:** Was it an anti-epileptic, or don't you know?

**A:** Not sure. *Ja*, I don't know but he said, this will help you, and it did. I only took it once when I got on the ship

**Q:** Brilliant. Sorted for the rest of...

**A:** I was sorted the rest of the time.

**Q:** Fantastic.

**A:** So I didn't really get sick at all.

**Q:** So you have heard all about Marion Island from your sister, but what were your first thoughts when you arrived here?

A: I was a little disappointed, because I thought there was completely snow and you know, snowing all the time. I actually expected it to be colder than it is right now.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: *Ja*, well, *ja*. Suppose it is not really in Antarctica, it is southern-arctic, so. I can't expect the temperatures to be the same here.

Q: Yes.

A: *Ja*.

Q: Okay. And when you arrived, did you spend a lot of time with the outgoing team?

A: *Ja*, I did actually. I spent a lot of time, especially the guy I was taking over from.

Q: *Ja*.

A: Jack[?].

Q: Okay.

A: I spent a lot of time with him. We actually shared a room together.

Q: Okay.

A: *Ja*, so I spent a lot of time with him.

Q: So he showed you what needed to be done in the met office.

A: Yes. Everything. He was pretty good. *Ja*.

Q: Great. Did they give you like interesting stories, or tell you stuff?

A: Yeah, they did tell me like a lot of stories. Especially about the guy that was here, for I think, half of the year

Q: Yes.

A: And he apparently jumped into the ocean I think to fetch his camera. *Ja*, so they told me all about that story.

Q: Oh, *ja*, that guy

A: I forgot his name. Yes, that guy. They told me about him.

Q: I know about him, yes.

A: *Ja*, they told me about his story and what was happening, throughout the year, the experiences they had with the other teammates as well, and telling me about the other guys' characters.

Q: Okay cool.

A: *Ja*. A lot of funny people in that team, so it is pretty cool.

Q: Interesting. Now describe a day in the life of the Metkassie on Marion.

A: [laugh] Okay. It is chilled, hey? [laugh]

Q: *Ja*.

A: You don't do much, you don't get much exercise. Well in the morning you just go down to take the sea temperature, which really sucks, especially if the weather is bad.

Q: *Ja*.

A: If it is raining, or whatever. You have to stand there for like 15 minutes to get the sea temp, and then you go change the wind-thingy that you measure the wind.

Q: *Ja*.

A: The wind gage and you reset the thermometers, and then throughout the day it is pretty much just observation. You look at what the clouds are doing and report it. Send it to South Africa, release the balloon later on in the day, *ja*. That is pretty much what you do.

Q: Okay.

A: You don't really walk much, it is just go outside to do the observation and that is it.

Q: Did you walk around the island at all?

A: I did, I think it is half. [laugh] Cause I went to Kildalkey and from there we went to water tunnel.

Q: Yes.

A: And from water tunnel walk back to base which was very bad.

Q: Yes.

A: *Ja*. [laugh] That was....

Q: Did you go out much or not really?

A: Not really, I didn't go out much

A: I think I went out a few times with Yolo Ship's Cove, because she used to go there every day, I think once in a while we would go out with her or with Klouks[Linda Clokie] who ever, but not really a lot.

Q: Okay.

A: *Ja*.

Q: Now what are the challenges living on an island like this?

A: Well, are you talking about the island, like the weather, or...

Q: Well, anyway you like. Both, both.

A: A team. Well the team is, well there is a lot of challenges with the team, because you know your personalities are different, you come from different backgrounds, you know? Different beliefs, you know?

Some, because most of the people, because I am very religious you know? My family go to...I go to church a lot you know? And I have noticed that a lot of the people in the team don't really do that, you know? They don't even go to church there, they are not

really, you know?

Their religion is... [laugh] is very different to mine.

So *ja*. Challenges like that, but you know, we eventually find common ground and then, you know, we just adapt to respect each other's religions, and those were the only few challenges we had. And the fact that, you know, there was only a few black people in the team...

You know, it is like that. I used to, especially because now Jholo and Allan are field assistants.

So, they are usually out in the field and I am left here, I am the only black guy here, you know? I get tired of speaking English. [laugh] You know? Nothing, you know, it's nothing bad or anything, but sometimes you just want to speak Tswana or something, you know? You just want to be with somebody that ...

**Q:** That understands you.

**A:** That you can relate to, *ja*.

Relate to and how you grew up and all that.

Because you grow up differently.

And *ja*, but it's It is cool you know? You get to learn a lot from people. You know, you learn about how they were raised, you know it is very different to yours, and it is cool.

**Q:** Interesting. Nice. Oh *ja*, and on the island specifically, any challenges about the island?

**A:** About the island?

There wasn't really much challenges with the island. I actually enjoyed it because you know? [laugh] I gained a lot of complexion, I got lighter. [laugh] Lighter because there is not much sunlight. You know?

**Q:** *Ja*.

**A:** But there weren't really any challenges, you know? I handled the weather, it was okay.

**Q:** And it helped if you stayed inside, so

**A:** Exactly! [laugh]

**Q:** Nice.

**A:** So it was cool.

**Q:** You touch a little on the team dynamic? How was it like to meet all these groups of people and realizing you now have to live with them for the next year?

**A:** I actually, I thought it, I told you I think they were a good team, especially, like two months before we met, before I met the whole team in Cape Town.

There were I think 5 team mates that I met in Pretoria, because they stayed in Pretoria.

**Q:** Oh okay.

**A:** So this other evening we met like after, because when we were still doing met-training.

Apparently they called Andries and said, "Listen let's meet", I think 2 nights after that at

Menlyn, Menlyn Square, "And we can have supper together..."

And just introduce each other you know? And then we just meet you know?

So I met every...I think it was Vincent, Lourens, Jacqui, Barend and then Andries.

So it was like 5 of them I met there.

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** So it is cool. Okay 4 actually because I met Andries before.

**Q:** At the training?

**A:** At the training.

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** *Ja* and I actually liked them you know? They were good people.

I think they were cool.

**Q:** Okay. How is it like leaving your family behind, and to go live with a group of strangers?

**A:** Yeah. [laugh] I am a family person; I miss my family a lot. I speak to my mother every second day, I think, you know? *Ja*... We have a, I have a very good relationship with my family, so *ja*, I miss them a lot.

**Q:** Do you get lots of calls from them?

**A:** Lots, yeah! My sisters send me emails every day.

**Q:** Nice.

**A:** Every single day, you know, just updating me with what is happening back home and everything. What they are doing. So it is cool. They have kids, so they send me pictures of their kids as well.

**Q:** Oh, nice.

**A:** Because I left when they were very young.

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** So, they will probably not remember me, or...

**Q:** Ah.

**A:** So I miss them a lot as well.

**Q:** Nice. So when you are not working, what do you do for entertainment?

**A:** I brought a lot of movies, hey?

**Q:** Oh okay.

**A:** A lot of movies. I watch movies a lot, but in November I received some books from back home.

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** Because I told you I am opening a business, so I got a few business books I have been



reading which have been very helpful as well. So, *ja*.

**Q:** Great. And did you have like big midwinter parties and stuff?

**A:** We had a lot, hey? We had a lot of parties like themed parties, we had, what is that, mystical creatures you know, we had themes like that where we had to dress up like a girl, an ogre or something.

And Peter Pan and whatever. [laugh] *Ja*, we had parties like that, we had a lot. I think we...during the World Cup...

**A:** We tried to stream the games and stuff, but it was very slow.

**Q:** Oh.

**A:** We had flags hung up in the lounge.

**Q:** Because you were still in the old base then?

**A:** *Ja*. Still in the old base then. *Ja*...

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** We tried to create like a little South African World Cup theme. [laugh]

**Q:** Ah, nice.

**A:** *Ja*, we tried, but it was cool I enjoyed the parties and the team...it was a lot of fun.

**Q:** Did you have a lot of interaction with the other bases from Gough or SANAE?

**A:** Not at all. Not at all. Not even once. [laugh] I think that, I think in Gough or SANAE, not sure. One of them called, they have called like twice

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** They were having a party and they called us like, "Hey we are drunk, we are having a party. Yeah!"

**A:** [laugh] "What are you guys doing?!" [laugh]

**Q:** Oh, I see!

**A:** Yeah, but they did that once or twice. [laugh] And the whole base was drunk there.

**Q:** Oei joei joei.

**A:** They are like, "Hey!" So they decided to call us, which was cool.

**Q:** *Ja*.

**A:** You know? *Ja*.

**Q:** Like random, "What are you doing- whatever?"

**A:** Well, despite from that? Nah. We don't really communicate with them. I don't know about the other team members, but for me, I don't know anybody in any of those teams, any of those islands. So...

**Q:** That is fair enough. Now, describe moving base, last year.

**A:** Yes.

**Q:** What was it like, to now live there for a few months, and now all of a sudden you have to move to this big new base?

**A:** It was exciting, but a little sad as well, because we got really attached to that old base, you know?

The old base is very intimate.

We see each other every day, we are closer, you know?

This base is beautiful, it is big, but you know. But there are days where you can go the whole day without seeing one of your teammates.

And they are here, you know?

But you don't get to see them, or you see them once when you have supper. You haven't seen them the whole day.

**Q:** Yes.

**A:** But at the old base, there is no way you are not going to see them, we go past and we see each other often.

It is smaller, and you know, it is intimate.

So, *ja*. That is the only thing, but the moving was okay, and I like the rooms, they are bigger.

**Q:** So what do you think about the new base?

**A:** I like the new base. The only thing that I don't like is that you can't open windows. But you know, apart from that, I like the new base.

**Q:** And the skivvy?

**A:** Skivvy'ss, is okay, because now, it is okay, it doesn't get that dirty, because it is big, you know? There is some areas where people barely even go to and you have to clean that place. It is just dust here and there.

**Q:** *Ja*.

**A:** You know? So, it is not really that dirty, but obviously it takes longer...

Because it is bigger. Like the kitchen! The kitchen is...it is hell. [laugh] You know, you need to be there for hours and hours to clean, you know?

But you know, it is okay, because obviously now the base is bigger, so the teams are bigger as well.

Because I think this is the biggest team that has ever been here. It is like 19 people.

**Q:** Your team now?

**A:** *Ja*. Our team is like 19 people.

And when my sister was here, I think she said they were 12 or 11...

In the team, and that has been the basic number, that's always been here...

*Ja*, but now the base is bigger, so you had to include some people.

**Q:** Fair enough.

A: And skivvy is not that bad, there is more people now. *Ja*, so it is okay.

Q: Now, how does the vibe differ from the old base and the new base?

A: The vibe, you mean like entertainment or just...

Q: Generally.

A: The atmosphere?

Q: Just the atmosphere.

A: I think people now are, I don't know, people spend too much time in their rooms now.

Because now, I don't know. At the old base people used to... You would never, there was never a dull day where people are just in their rooms and you don't get to see them at all.

But ever since we have been here, people have been, you know, kind of hiding a bit, you know? They are spending a lot of time in their rooms, or in the offices, you know? So that is the only thing about it, you know?

But I think back at the old base it was more alive, you know? People wouldn't want to spend time in their rooms, they would just walk up to the bar or something, *ja*, and now, I think it is because the bar is so far away, everything is far. So people tend to spend time in their rooms a lot.

Q: Okay. Now, you were also here while the construction teams were here.

A: Yes. I was.

Q: Now, what kind of interaction did you have with the people of the construction teams?

A: Well, I got along with them very well, hey! A lot of them, the thing is that their language differed so... [laugh] it was a little hard because they were more isiXhosa and Afrikaans speaking, so it was, you know? But I liked the guys, I mean they were cool, I learned a lot of isiXhosa now, as well. [laugh]

Q: Nice.

A: *Ja*. I also know some isiXhosa now and I can communicate with them, but they were cool guys, you know? I got along with them very well. *Ja*.

Q: Nice. And how was it working with DEA when they were here?

A: What do you mean how we?

Q: Well, with the officials from the department

A: Oh, the guys that were here for ...

Q: *Ja* for the VIP voyage, but also in generally.

How was it working with them? How was the VIP voyage?

A: It was good, hey? It was very good. I made a friend back there.

A: This guy he was a scientist, I forgot what he did, but he was actually very cool. We exchanged phone numbers and stuff, we became friends on Facebook

Q: To keep in touch.

**A:** *Ja*, to keep in touch. We spent a lot of time together. You know the media people were cool as well, and I didn't get to meet the Deputy Minister, *ja*. But I heard she was very nice, you know? I just said "Hello" and she shook my hand and all, but we didn't really talk, but you know, she was friendly, you know? She ate with everybody, she sat with anybody. And you know, I, the whole VIP period there was a lot of fun, you know? It was informative, you got to talk to these people and they told you everything, and then you got to explain to them what is happening on the island as well, and *ja* our relationship was okay.

**Q:** Brilliant. So you got on with the people who managed it?

**A:** *Ja*, I did. I did.

**Q:** When they were there.

**A:** No problem there.

**Q:** Cool, and now, can you think of any incident or whatever that was, that you don't, that wasn't that nice to experience while you were here this year?

**A:** Experience. [laugh]

**Q:** A bad experience that you had?

**A:** Are you serious? Can we record this?

**Q:** Yes. *Ja, ja, ja*.

**A:** [laugh]

**Q:** Well, it is up to you if you want to tell us, but it would be interesting to know.

**A:** Well, I think at the beginning of the year, I think not only me, but everybody else had a problem with Andries, so that was the only issue, but I got over it and I forgave him it was cool. I was actually helping him, actually helped him when everyone else was saying he must go home and stuff, but you know, I forgave him, it is cool. *Ja*. But that was the only problem; especially on the ship he was not really nice. But you know it is cool.

**Q:** Fair enough. And did you have any positive...what is your favourite, if you think about Marion Island, what are you going to remember positively? What good experiences did you have?

**A:** I don't know, there is a lot, I made a lot of friends. Especially Pierre, Pierre was the, my mentor you know? He said: "If you need help with anything, your business, whatever, relationships, anything, just call me." And it is good to have somebody like that, that you know is always going to help you and stuff. Whenever I am in Cape Town these people would say, "Hey man, whenever you are in Cape Town, you should come visit". Things like that. So that is what I am going to take home with me, you know?

**Q:** So, what is the most common misconception...?

About Marion you think? The things that people think about Marion that are completely...

Wrong or incorrect.

**A:** You mean the people back home?

**Q:** *Ja.*

**A:** There is people back home who think Marion is, they don't even know where it is.  
[laugh] You know? I just think less people know about Marion Island.

And I think a lot of people should know about it. You know, I am one of them. I didn't know anything about Marion; if it wasn't for my sister, I wouldn't have known anything.

They don't talk about it enough in schools. They don't talk about it enough anywhere.

So few people know about it, especially when I left and told people that I am going to Marion Island, they were like, what, where is that, you know? And I had to explain, "No it is there" you know? People do not know about Marion, you know?

And I just think a lot of people should be more informed about it. People should know about it. And there is not a lot of people who apply for the positions as well.

A lot more people should apply for the positions, you know? So, people should know about it.

**Q:** Why do you think it is important to have a base here?

**A:** At Marion?

**Q:** *Ja.* For South Africa. Why do you think it is important for South Africa to have a base? Or do you think it is important that we do?

I don't think it is important to be investing as much money as they are, you know? I think the base is wonderful, but I think it is, they do not need, we don't, the people here do not need a base like this, you know?

It is too luxurious; it is too much like a hotel, it shouldn't be like that. It is, usually the people that are here, are scientists, people that actually work outside the base...

Not in the base, you know? So you do not need to have anything fancy.

You know, I think it is too fancy, and I think that only half of the money they spent here, should be, should have been used, you know? It will be better like that.

The money would have been invested in something else.

So that is the only problem I have with...

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** The base, *ja*. But it is important you know. For science, for research.

**Q:** *Ja.*

**A:** You know it is important, obviously, you know? But I do not think they need a base like this.

**Q:** Would you ever come back?

**A:** I think so? I think so! [laugh] I think that always, *ja*.

**Q:** Nice.

**A:** I think so.

**Q:** Brilliant. Cool, well, we are pretty much at an end. Is there anything else you would like

to add about your year, here?

A: No. Not really.

Q: What is the thing you are going to miss the most about Marion?

A: That I am going to miss and what I do miss...?

Q: That you are going to miss, or that you think you might miss about the island.

A: Yes.

Q: When you are gone.

A: The views. [laugh] And I don't know, the freedom, I don't know, you just feel so free when you are here.

Q: Yes.

A: It is like all of your worries are gone, like you don't have to worry about anything when you are here, you know? It is just, it is like a different planet, you know?

It is *ja*, it is free. It is fresh air. [laugh] So *ja*, that is the only thing that I am going to miss, you know?

Q: Brilliant.

A: Anything else you would like to add?

Q: No, it is it.

A: Cool.

Thank you very, very much for your time.

Q: No problem.