

Hello and welcome. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. For today's program, we have something a little different. First we'll travel to South Africa to hear about a woman judge who is in charge of the Oscar Pistorius trial. He is the famous sports star who is accused of killing his girlfriend.

Then we'll stay in the area to hear from our correspondent, Anita Powell. She will tell us about the journey she has made from covering stories in small towns in the U. S. state of Texas, to reporting on major international news for VOA. We are happy that you can spend some time with us today as we hear about our world ...As It Is.

Thokozile Masipa is perhaps the most famous woman in South Africa. She currently serves as the judge in the murder trial of one of the best known sports stars in the country. Christopher Cruise tells us more about her.

When South African officials announced Judge Masipa would try the case, local newspapers reacted with interest. They noted that a judge known for her position on domestic violence would be deciding the case. She has given strong sentences to men whom she finds guilty of abusing women. Oscar Pistorius is charged with killing his girlfriend.

South African officials say Thokozile Masipa was not chosen to hear the case because she is a woman. They said she was chosen because she is a knowledgeable and respected legal expert.

The judge is now at the center of a case that has broken legal barriers. It is the first South African criminal trial to be broadcast live on television.

Thokozile Masipa was one of the judges and magistrates who have helped change the country's legal system over the past 20 years. In 1994, 160 of 165 judges were white men. Today, the judges are much more representative of South Africa's population.

Last year, the Department of Justice said 100 judges are black men. Seventy-one others are white men. Forty-nine are black women, and 21 are white women.

Reporters are not permitted to talk to Judge Masipa or her two aides during the trial of Oscar Pistorius. The three will decide whether to believe the star runner. Oscar Pistorius says he shot his girlfriend because he thought she was a criminal who had entered their home.

People who have met Thokozile Masipa say she is intelligent and works hard. She was born in 1947 and grew up in the Soweto and Alexandra townships of Johannesburg. Blacks were forced to live in those areas during the years of forced racial separation known as apartheid.

She struggled to find a job as a social worker because of her race. After working different jobs, she became a news reporter in the late 1970s. She began studying law at night while working during the day and caring for her two children.

Judge Masipa told a film crew years ago that the first years were not easy. She began working against apartheid as the system was coming to an end. She says her race, and the fact that she was a woman, hurt her. She says her legal opponents would often call and ask to speak with Mr. Masipa. They expected her to be a man.

In recent years as a judge, she has shown that she will use her position to fight domestic abuse in South Africa. James Grant is a law professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. He says she has been doing a good job in the Pistorius trial.

“(I) think very well under the circumstances, given that this is, at least on, on, in respect of the media issue, it’s trailblazing. This is a first for South Africa and she’s having to make lots of decisions on (the) spur of the moment. I think she’s doing relatively well.”

Judge Masipa has not spoken much during the trial. When she does speak, her voice is so low that people in the courtroom have difficulty hearing her. But there is no question that she is in control of a trial that has captured the attention of millions of people around the world. I'm Christopher Cruise.

Thanks, Chris. Have you ever considered being a reporter? It can be an exciting job. But it often takes a long time to work your way up from covering events in small towns to "hitting the big time" ...working for major news organizations. Today we hear of one such success story. Here is VOA correspondent Anita Powell in South Africa.

I began my journalism career by writing stories about the actions of city officials in three fast-growing towns in Texas, near Austin, the state capital. During that time I learned a lot about American democracy.

But after three years I became tired of reporting about activities in these small towns. After I left, I was happy that I would never again have to sit in a government meeting room for five hours watching elected city officials make decisions.

I understood how happy I was that I was no longer a local reporter on my first day with American troops on a patrol near the Iraqi capital Baghdad. We were trying to visit the mayor. But, a roadside bomb exploded. We had to wait under the hot sun in military vehicles for bomb experts to come.

I had two thoughts as I waited.

First, this would never happen in Texas.

And second, this may not be fun. But at least I don't have to attend long city council meetings anymore!

City government may be democracy at its closest to the people. But the truth is it is mostly very uninteresting.

Virgil James is a spokesman for the city of Johannesburg. He told me at the mayors' meeting that the actions of city government may not be exciting. But he said these actions are necessary.

The yearly meeting was held in a much nicer place than the place where Leander, Texas city council meetings were held. Leander is one of the cities where I used to report. For some reason, the meeting of big-city mayors made me feel a longing for Leander. So I called the city's former mayor, John Cowman. He was surprised to hear from me. I had not spoken to him in 10 years. He offered advice to mayors of cities much larger than Leander.

"It all boils down to one thing: education. It is the bottom line. You need an educated populace. You need to empower them through education. If you educate folks, this world will be better."

I attended my first city council meeting in Leander more than 10 years ago. About 14,000 people lived there then. More than twice that many live there now. It is one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S.

Dealing with the fast rate of growth was not easy. Mr. Cowman was a divisive mayor. And the city council meetings were often uninteresting and could be difficult to report. Sometimes citizens were very unhappy with the decisions city officials made. They would come to the meetings and show their emotions loudly and angrily.

I did not understand at the time that I was watching something special or, as Mr. Cowman claims, that I was part of it.

“Everything you do learn, really starts at the local level, Anita, and you’re living proof of it. We went through the war together. And see, that’s why I love you for that, you know, it’s like, wow. You reported things in our area that were occurring and so you were part of the team. And that’s the way we all viewed things. And yeah, there were some times I (said) ‘That darn Anita Powell,’ or ‘I’m afraid of her.’ But in the end look where we ended up.”

I have now come to know how important my days reporting about Leander were. I understand that the story of city government is really the story of people's hopes and fears and homes. Anita Powell, VOA News, Johannesburg.

Thanks, Anita, for sharing your story with us. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. More Learning English programs are just moments away, and there is world news at the beginning of the hour on VOA.



