



# These lips don't lie

See-through solution offers hope for deaf people struggling with mask-wearing during the pandemic



For more information, follow Thando Mtsweni on Facebook: [facebook.com/thando.mtsweni.5](https://facebook.com/thando.mtsweni.5)

**The face mask**, a necessary accessory to survive the pandemic, presents a challenge for the hearing impaired, as it prevents them from reading lips or facial expressions. Seeing first-hand how deaf people in South Africa struggle to communicate in schools and other public spaces, Thando Mtsweni began researching transparent masks, eventually founding The Visual Mask, which has three designs.

The first and most popular is the original design of a transparent mask with black lining around the mask and black ear strings with a black valve. The second design is a beverage mask, which has a zip and allows people to drink while wearing the mask. The third is a branded option for organisations to brand these masks with the company logo or scriptures for religious organisations.

While awareness helped the masks trend on Twitter, Mtsweni is mostly proud of the conversations they started in South Africans about inclusivity and disability. And though COVID-19 has been the source of pain and anxiety for many around the world, the designer believes there's something humanely beneficial to flashing a smile to strangers in these grim times – an act of acknowledging another's existence. Traditional surgical masks rob us of this basic human exchange.

## Making a difference

As someone who spent two years teaching English in China, Mtsweni is passionate about education. She has been working closely with deaf schools and identified a big need for masks like those she has designed. However, there is no funding from organisations to donate masks for deaf schools. She has been trying to fundraise to donate masks and managed to raise enough money to donate to a class at Sizwile School for the Deaf in Soweto.

Still, she wishes she could do more, just like she wishes she had started sooner. She had the idea of making transparent masks in March 2020, just when COVID-19 hit. But she procrastinated. If she had started earlier, she would have found solutions sooner and would have been far along the project now. That's why she feels that, if she could go back in time, she would advise herself to start sooner and not let fear get in her way.

For Mtsweni, 2020 was a challenge in many ways. She was struggling with grieving for her mother and her sister, both of whom she had lost the previous year. Living alone through the pandemic has also been hard. What made it even more difficult was the pressure of switching to an online mode of learning for her full-time Postgraduate Diploma in Business Administration at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS).

## Increasing awareness

Looking forward, she plans to lobby for more change to happen and get funding to ensure all deaf schools get free visual masks to improve their communication, as this is still a major issue for teachers, staff and learners in deaf schools. She also wants to do school tours in deaf schools to deliver these free masks and carry out fun educational activities.

Mtsweni is working on a baby sign language book to introduce baby sign language in early childhood education by providing training for babies and their parents. She is also excited about teaching people this new skill and being at the forefront of bridging the gap between deaf and hearing people.

Ultimately, the face masks are just one part of Thando's plans. The biggest impact she's made so far is by raising awareness and it's something she wants to continue. Most of all, she hopes to not only start a conversation, but also create everlasting impact. It's about ensuring that we all take the responsibility to create deaf-friendly experiences and work towards a more inclusive world.

Text | Eugene Yiga Photography | Supplied, Andrey Popov