

# Humble beginnings and happy endings w/ Zyda Rylands

 By [Jessica Taylor](#)

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Growing up as a tailor's daughter in the midst of apartheid, Zyda Rylands, now the MD of Woolworths Food, is proof of the pudding that workforce diversity is what drives the competitive advantage of one of the leading retailers in South Africa...

"I work with very talented people of all ages, races, genders, sexuality, social backgrounds, cultures, and religions, says Rylands. "There is no shortage of female role models at Woolworths, at every level."

Here, Rylands shares her personal journey and urges other women not to limit their aspirations. "We see the world through a different lens and we have enriched the business world with our experiences, perspectives and approach," she says.



Zyda Rylands

***Mention some of the challenges faced throughout your ascent in the corporate world, and how you overcame them.***

I was born in Cape Town in 1964 and grew up during a very volatile chapter of our country's history. I realised early on in life that I had to work hard and stay focused on what I wanted to achieve. There are no free lunches. I received a study loan from a business associate of my father and worked every weekend and holiday to repay the loan. My motto in life has always been that 'you suffer the pain of sacrifice or suffer the pain of regret', and I did not want to regret anything in life. I completed a BCom at the University of Cape Town and completed my Honours degree through the University of the Western Cape. I was very proud to complete my articles at Kessel Feinstein and qualified as a chartered accountant in 1993.

Along the way I have had the privilege of working with incredible people and exceptional leaders, who mentored, encouraged and believed in me. In life we have to seek out those we aspire to be like. We also need to acknowledge our loved ones. They are the people that anchor us in life and that support us most in our endeavours.

***Do you think your family history influenced your progression into the food department?***

I come from a rich-and-vibrant culture. We love to celebrate, and like many other cultures we do so around the table with food. I have always had a love and passion for food, and as food plays such a big role in our business, it was always my desire to experience this side of our business. To be a 'foodie' in Woolworths is a very special thing. An understanding of foods opens up an entire world and helps us make a real emotional connection with our customers. I am passionate about food and have many treasured family recipes. I love to cook and entertain family and friends when I have the time. The progression into foods was therefore an exciting opportunity for me, and a journey filled with much learning and discovery.

***Does a glass ceiling exist for women in retail? Have you experienced any difficulties in this regard?***

Woolies recognises that diversity drives our competitive advantage. I work with very talented people of all ages, races, genders, sexuality, social backgrounds, cultures and religions. There is no shortage of female role models at Woolworths, at every level. I can honestly say that personally I have not experienced the glass ceiling in my career at Woolworths, as I did not want it to be the bogeyman or red herring that holds me back. I always believe that you should never start with a negative thought.

***In your opinion, what accounts for the lack of women in positions of leadership in the sector?***

The private sector does not exist in a vacuum and often the challenges we see in business reflect those of our society. I

would like to see more women in business across all sectors. In Woolworths our senior leadership teams are well represented. This remains an ongoing journey by women in the private sector generally, not just at Woolworths. I have always felt very passionately about the education of girls and women in our society and have mentored and supported many young women in their careers. I support education initiatives and feel that education should play a role at every level.

**▣ *Based on your experience, what advice would you give to women pursuing a career in retail management?***

My advice would be not to be afraid to start at the bottom. Try different areas in retail to find what you love at the beginning. Sometimes it is necessary to make lateral moves to gain more knowledge and experience before you can move forwards and upwards. A career in retail offers many opportunities from finance, science, creative design, buying and administration. Retail is a vivacious industry with an exciting and energetic culture. It is important to make use of opportunities, never shy away from challenges and always push the boundaries of your comfort zone. Women often lack confidence and feel they need to be perfect to take the next step. I would say take the shot and complement your development with the right people and a willingness to acknowledge your need for help and support. Accumulate knowledge by training and gaining experience. Seek out those you aspire to be like and ask questions. Remember, leaders are the sum total of their values, principles and drive. Work hard, be patient and industrious. You are the architect of your success.

**▣ *What are you most proud of, in terms of what you've achieved throughout your career and at Woolworths?***

I have been blessed with many achievements, most recently, the building of the foods business over the last five years, with the support of many wonderful people. I have been privileged to work in many branches of this business and have gained an enormous amount of experience and knowledge along the way. What I am most proud of is our incredible brand. Woolworths is a brand that has been built on strong values. We are obsessed with quality, excellence and doing the right thing. Our brand is conscious and in touch with our customer and their needs. This includes having a conscience, caring about where we source our products, driving sustainability, equity and caring for our communities. We are an organisation with the purpose of making a difference, because we care. We are clear that how we do things does matter. My leadership role in guarding that is my most important role.

I am truly very proud of working for a company that has deeply held values. Quality, style, innovation, integrity, energy and sustainability make up the Woolworths 'difference'.

**▣ *You served as chairman of the Audit Committee for Parliamentary Services and as a non-executive director of the Black Management Forum, as well as the Open Society Foundation for South Africa. Why are these initiatives important to you?***

I am passionate about people, leadership development and transformation in corporates and in South Africa. I am determined to give back and drive social development and, therefore, I work with many NGOs. I currently serve as a non-executive director on the board of the National Urban Reconstruction and Housing Agency and the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. I served as chairman of the Audit Committee for Parliamentary Services and as a non-executive director of the Black Management Forum and as a trustee of the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture. I served as a non-executive director of the Open Society Foundation of SA for more than 10 years. It is an honour to be able to serve and contribute to a more prosperous, secure future for our country.

**▣ *What is your message to other women?***

I would encourage women to believe in themselves and follow their dreams, whatever they may be. In the business world, I would urge women not to limit their aspirations. We see the world through a different lens and we have enriched the business world with our experiences, perspectives and approach. Moreover, I would like to see more women support each other in the private sector.

*Zyda joined Woolworths in 1996 and worked in the finance and store operation teams. She was appointed the People &*

*Transformation Director of Woolworths in 2005 and was appointed to the Board in August 2006. She was appointed as the Chief Operating Officer: Support Services in 2008. She is currently the Managing Director for Food and was appointed in this role in 2010. She serves as a trustee of the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence & Torture. Zyda served as Chairman of the Audit Committee for Parliamentary Services and as a Non-executive Director of the Black Management Forum and Non-executive Director of the Open Society Foundation for South Africa.*

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