



The triumph of a quiet dreamer

Sibusiso Vilane, the first black person to stand on Everest's summit, kept his great ambition to himself, writes MICHAEL SCHMIDT

HOW do you size up a man so quiet and retiring that he hardly mentioned his most cherished dream to his wife — to join one of the world's most rarefied clubs by climbing Mount Everest?

Sibusiso Vilane may hail from a world perpetually tilted at an angle, but the hut-stubbed hills of Swaziland seem unlikely preparation for the vertiginous Everest.

His easy breathing as he gave a radio interview at 7.15am South African time on Wednesday, the moment he arrived back at Base Camp in Nepal after becoming the first black person to reach the summit, belied the physical hardships of the treacherous climb.

It was as a schoolboy taking on dares in rural Ejubukweni, 20km north-east of Mbabane, Swaziland, that Vilane first sailed over obstacles in his way: 40-gallon drums or fence posts, anything to show off his high-jumping style.

Sometimes, according to his friend Siza Welcome Gama, whom he met in Grade 1, the young Vilane would misjudge, trip and fall. But he always weighed up his chances beforehand and hated to be bested.

Gama describes his friend of those days as "always cool and calm", a straight-arrow student.

"I think he wanted to be a soldier because he liked the wilderness, mountains and forest."

Gama heard on the radio that a Sibusiso Vilane had conquered Everest but did not realise it was his friend until told so by the Sunday Times.

Incredulously, Gama mentally piles images of the hill in front of him one on top of the other: "8 850m? Yih! A person like him is courageous and doesn't want to be defeated, so I'm not surprised."

Mountaineers are often notorious egomaniacs or virtual recluses. Everest pioneer Edmund Hillary, a bee-keeper, and Vilane, a wannabe chicken farmer, fall into the second category.

The root of Vilane's reserve may lie not merely in a love for the stillness of the outdoors but also in the isolation of his childhood. His mother, Lomini Tsabedze, now 63, split up with his allegedly abusive father, Simon Vilane, when Vilane was only three.

Speaking through an interpreter, she says Vilane's relationship with his father, whom he last saw in 1999 when he was still working at the Malolotja National Park in Swaziland, is poor.

"They don't understand each other because of the feud when he was young."

But Vilane snr, who lives in Schoemandsdal, a small settlement near the Swaziland border, insists he and his son have a good relationship.



HE'S MY MAN: Nomsa Vilane, Sibusiso's wife, rejoices at his conquest of Everest

The climber's wife, Nomsa, 26 — whom he started dating when she was a schoolgirl of only 15 — puts it most succinctly: "Sibusiso told himself his parents died a long time ago. He blamed both of them for what happened: the split."

She says that although her husband lends his father money and speaks politely enough to him on the infrequent occasions they meet, he has been deeply wounded by his father's refusal to attend the 2001 funeral of his sister, Busisiwe, because of an old dispute over not having benefited from her dowry. An elder brother, Mangaliso, had died aged two.

About his relationship with his

father, Vilane says: "It is not a healthy one from the point that ever since they separated, when I was maybe about three years old, my father never really cared about my sister and me at all."

"He has never maintained me, never paid for my education, never saw me grow because he was living in South Africa and I in Swaziland ... and obviously that does not lead to a good relationship."

Vilane says he started young herding goats and cattle. The money went to his grandmother until his mother came back from the city and sent him to school. He was already 10 by then.

He says he achieved "position one all the time" at school, knowing how

"hard it was out there."

Neither of his parents were aware that he planned to climb Everest.

At first glance, the homestead that Vilane built at Lubuyane, near Ejubukweni, in 1998 seems typical: a three-legged iron pot simmering under flapping black plastic shade cover; tyres and bits of scrap metal lying on corrugated-iron roofs; fat chickens guiding their broods around wattle-and-daub coops; and newspaper posters of Kaizer Chiefs stars sharing the lounge wall with a framed postcard of Swazi King Mswati III.

But two large circles in the clay mark it as different. One is an oddly English decorative pond sunk into the ground,

ringed with rocks and brimming with bulrushes and lily pads. Then there is a scorched ring that was once a rondavel. Police believe that neighbours, disturbed by Vilane's eccentricity, torched it after he left for Everest.

Not all the locals are as narrow-minded about his endeavours, however. An excited high school pupil, Mbongiseni Dlamini, says: "I heard on Radio Swazi this morning that he had climbed Everest. They say this man is a master."

Vilane's lounge wall also boasts trophies that are unusual in a rural Swazi home: a framed certificate, dated August 25 1999, saying Vilane climbed the 2 973m Sterkhorh in the Drakensberg;



FOLLOWING DAD'S FOOTSTEPS: Nomsa Vilane with the pioneering mountaineer's children, Bhekiwe, 8, Sethabile, 11, and Vukile, 2



DETERMINED: Sibusiso Vilane

his wife seldom reflected his passion.

"It's not something he talked about, even now when he left for Everest," she says. "He didn't practise or do exercises. I used to wake him up early and say, 'Go and run on the road', but he'd say: 'No, I'm lazy'. I had read the history of that mountain and I feared that if he didn't train, he wouldn't survive."

Just about the only person with whom Vilane appears to have shared his dreams is his old friend Siphon Themba, his wife's brother.

"I spent five days at Silotfwane Mountain in Malolotja with him when he started speaking of his dreams to climb mountains," Themba says.

"Later he met Doble, who wanted to take him to Kilimanjaro. When Sibusiso came back, he started saying Doble wanted him to take Everest."

"I believed he would make it, because he did whatever he set out to do. He used to tell me when he trained me for running marathons: 'Don't ever look back — you'll only hear the footsteps of those behind.'"

Taking Vilane's measure this week, President Thabo Mbeki said: "Today all Africans stand 8 848m tall."

Back in the gentle hills of Swaziland, Vilane's old friend Gama agrees: "I'm very proud that I'm also that tall because of him."

● For more reports and pictures of the South Africans who tried to climb Everest this season, go to www.sundaytimes.co.za/everest/