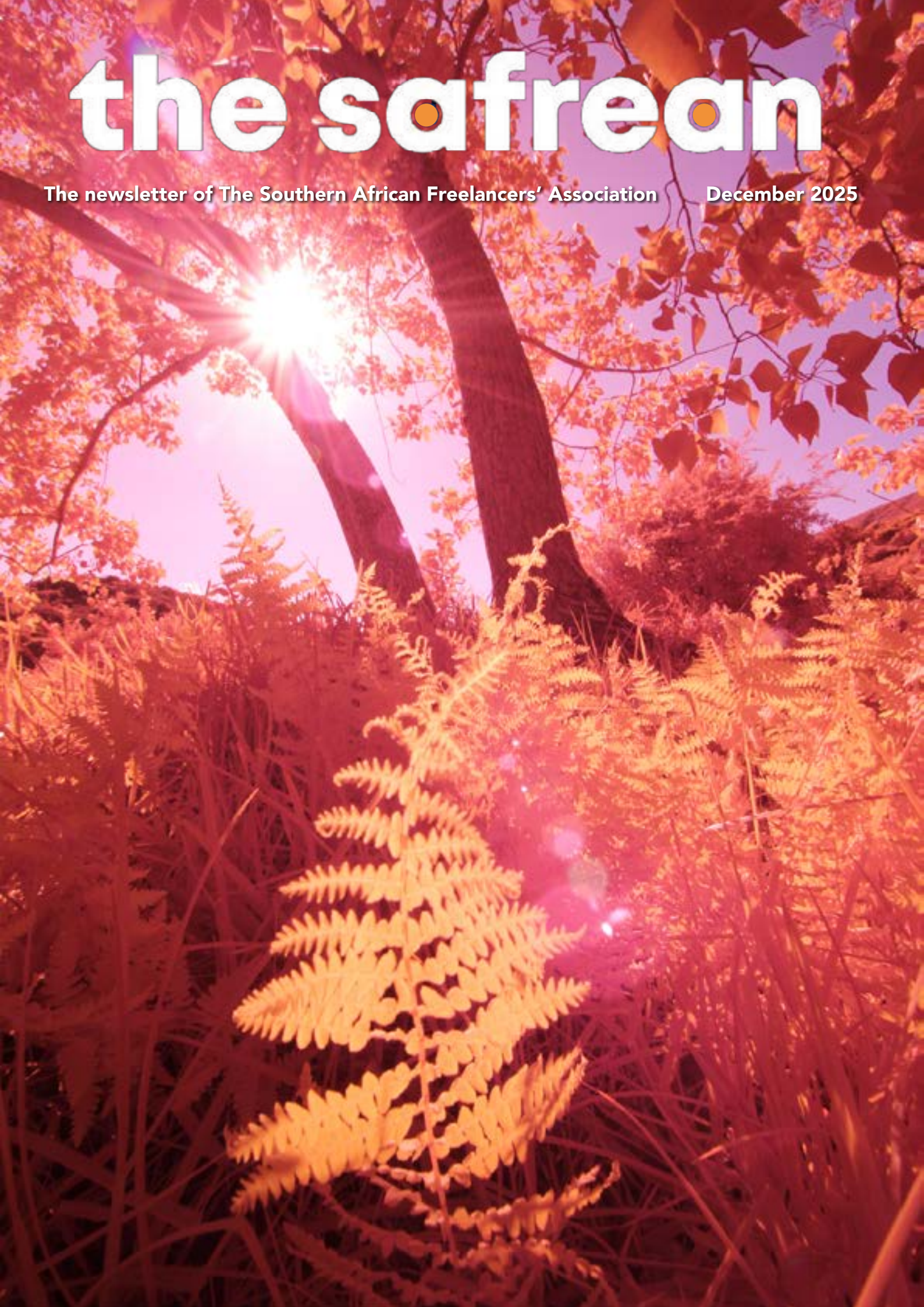


the safrean

The newsletter of The Southern African Freelancers' Association

December 2025



Festive message from **the Chair**



ENDING 2025 WITH RENEWED PURPOSE

Francis Bacon, an English philosopher, reminds us that happiness is not a destination we arrive at, but a posture of the heart. He is quoted, "It is not happy people who are thankful, but thankful people who are happy."

As we reach the close of 2025, it is therefore my honour to extend our heartfelt thankfulness to each member of Safrea for being with us throughout the year and providing so much value to all we do. Safrea exists because of you. This year we have not only stabilised the association, but we have also broken down walls that have in the past inhibited seamless communication. One of our biggest wins this year has been having open and frank discussions with members on critical issues in our Google Group and being available for one-on-one meetings. Through these,

we have seen our Achilles heel and are working daily to turn weaknesses into strengths.

The most fundamental of these has been better governance. With the passage of our Constitution, Safrea now stands ready to take off into its next biggest era. An era we believe will attract new members, deliver tangible benefits, and make us a strong, financially sustainable organisation. While happiness for me would be a stronger association bank account, today my happiness is the unity we have as an association, which I have no doubt is the perfect foundation for building the best version of Safrea. Please join me as I take you through my reflections on the past year and hopes for 2026.

WHY DO WE BELONG TO SAFREA?

In October, during a Safrea in-person event in Gauteng North, a former Safrea Exco member asked me why I joined Safrea. While it seems a very simple question, it was equally thought-provoking. I explained that what appealed to me was the validation of my expertise, belonging to a professional group (which some clients require these days when vetting your credibility), and being part of a network of professionals from across Southern Africa to learn best practices. The lady said, "So finding a job was not one of your top reasons? Do you see most people belong to an association because of the fundamental professional value it brings?" I nodded.

Reflecting on the past year, I am reminded of that conversation. For Safrea to grow and continue meeting its membership's needs, it first needs to rediscover its WHY. Many of our members are thriving in the freelance space, but have kept their membership because Safrea offers more than just connecting to the next job.

Professional associations such as Safrea matter because they establish industry standards, advocate for the profession, provide specialised professional development sessions and offer crucial mentorship. Through our Google Group, we are able to facilitate peer-to-peer learning and create a vital community for sharing best

practices, all of which build credibility and drive collective growth beyond just job placement. An association is a hub for ethics, advocacy, and continuous education, shaping the field and supporting members' long-term success in a dynamic economy.

THE AI THREAT: HOW WILL SAFREA RESPOND?

This past month, I froze when someone presented to me an Artificial Intelligence-designed logo for a national event. I asked what app was used and was informed that it was Gemini Nano Banana.

Many of us may be asking an honest and necessary question: where do media and communication freelancers stand in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence? AI can now draft press releases, design logos, generate headlines, and summarise complex information in seconds. This reality can feel unsettling, even threatening. Yet it is important to state clearly and confidently: this moment is not the end of our relevance; it is a defining test of it.

Our true value has never been in producing words, images or layouts alone, but in judgement, context, ethics, lived experience and trust. Clients do not simply need content; they need credibility, cultural intelligence, accountability and insight – qualities that no algorithm can genuinely replicate. These are things that Safrea has to champion, and remind the sector why professional freelancers matter and, most importantly, why Safrea members matter. I hope that this is a conversation that Safrea can champion and recentre ethical freelancers in the best possible light, to dim the threats that may come from unethical use of AI.

RATES SURVEY UPDATE

Thank you to all of you for participating in our Rates Survey. I am pleased to announce that we received close to 300 responses, which, in a sense, suggests that most of us in our 220-member group responded. However, the numbers are still a bit low compared to previous rates surveys, when we hit the 500 mark. We have therefore extended the period to the end of January to get more responses and improve our overview of industry rates. During the extension, we will continue to share the survey link across various platforms, and I am very optimistic that we can surpass 500. It is our intention to conduct and complete this survey during our current term to ensure the next Exco has an asset to help grow Safrea. It is also

important for helping freelancers see how their rates compare to others'.

WORLD CONFERENCE OF SCIENCE JOURNALISTS

About two years ago, I got a call while in Eswatini from Mandi Smallhorne, the President of the South African Science Journalists Association. This was a long call in which Mandi shared with me the vision for the World Conference of Science Journalists and the role she wished Safrea could play. The passion in her voice as she articulated the steps towards the conference was so thick one could touch it. We pledged full support to her, as SASJA is also our member.

Watching the conference play out was a moment of pride for Safrea. It is inspiring to see a vision come to life. While with more resources we could have done better with our support, in the end, it was the event's success that really touched us. Our OSC member Lynne Smit kept us well-informed at every step via the socials, and it was heartwarming to see even government socials reporting on it daily. On behalf of Exco and Safrea, I congratulate SASJA, Mandi, Engela Duvenage and the team on a hugely successful conference!

FESTIVE SEASON

The festive season is a time for family, reflection and rejuvenation. While freelancers work around the clock, this period is one of the rare times we actually get a break. From the chairperson's desk, I wish you all a restful festive season filled with joy, love, gratitude and positive reflection on the past year. Safrea Exco members have been a joy to work with this year, challenging and pushing us to do better. Most importantly, they were always throwing their hat in the ring when we needed something done.

I thank you. My Vice-Chairperson, Kay Johnstone, who put together this newsletter, has been living and breathing Safrea and keeping us moving even when we were on our last breath, and I thank her for that. Our Admin Thea, thank you, and thank you to OSC as well. Most importantly, thank you members. We are grateful that you still believe in our vision and mission, and we pledge to continue serving you to the best of our ability and resources. I look forward to continued positive reflections in 2026.

Nathi Gule

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Our spotlight this month falls on Nicolette Gardiner. As a highly experienced editor, she has worked on 28 books across a wide range of genres and is passionate about helping authors refine their craft. She previously ran writing and editing workshops through the Writers 2000 interest group before it became a Covid casualty. Widowed twice, she lives in an over-50s complex, enjoys swimming and gym sessions, and often works from her favourite spot, Grumpy's Café in Edenvale, or at home, accompanied her much-loved black cat.

MEET NICOLETTE GARDINER

Please describe yourself in two sentences?

I am a professional freelancer in the areas of writing, editing and proofreading. I have a passion for words!

Please tell us a little about what you do and how long you've been a freelancer.

Having worked in the fields of communication, public relations and writing for many years, I embarked on my freelancing journey around 14 years ago. This was after being boarded as a result of my multiple sclerosis. I don't let the MS hold me back and live by the mantra. "I have MS, MS does not have me."

How long have you been a member of Safrea, and what do you appreciate most about being a member?

I think it's five years since I joined Safrea. I value the online events for members. The rates survey information was invaluable in assisting me to set fair rates for my work. In addition to my Safrea membership, I am a Full member of the Professional Editors Guild. I get great value and benefit from these groups.

Please describe a typical day in your life?

As a committed Christian, I begin each day with devotions, followed by exercise and focused work, always meeting deadlines. My work includes client meetings, webinars, editing books (my favourite), and producing a complex newsletter. I've run writing workshops and value time with friends, study groups, and good coffee. Evenings end with reading, wine or tea, and the quiet company of my black cat.

Where/how do you find inspiration?

From life and people around me. All my writing has aspects of my own life in it, including my published short stories. I love writing stories for my five grandchildren for their birthdays and the things that interest children inspire my ideas for those.



News from around the Regions

Emerging Region

20 September event

From Solo to Solidarity, building bonds through Safrea

A brief in-person meet-up session, which was organised and hosted by Safrea chairperson for emerging regions Keabaka Morwe, was held in Mahikeng on 20 September. The session took place at the Kago Funerals office. Kago is an entrepreneur and a well-respected philanthropist in the community.

With Keabaka being the first and only member from Mahikeng, this was the first in-person seminar of its kind. The main purpose of the seminar was to help advance Safrea's mission, which is "To build a community of independent professionals who advance the interests and prestige of Safrea members

in their role as media and communications freelancers."

Among those present were representatives and students from the North West University, representatives from *Maftown Online Magazine*, local photographers and entrepreneurs.

The topic presented by our guest speaker, Kabelo Makhobosi, was "Growing your presence and finding clients through social media". It was presented under the theme "Connecting, learning and growing together as freelancers. It was an energy-filled session where the participants actively asked questions and shared their opinions.

Keabaka Morwe

A Lecturer from the North West University, together with the students, our guest speaker of the day, and representatives from Maftown Online Magazine.



News from around the Regions

Gauteng North

18 October event

North Gauteng Safrea members braved the stormy weather and got together on Saturday 18 October for an extremely informative session on rates and market-related tools. We had the pleasure of being joined by our Chairperson, Nathi Gule, as well. In an interesting turn of events, seven editors were at the event; thus, the focus was narrowed to Editing, Proofreading and Translation rates and fees. Furthermore, the use of AI and how it can both hinder and help us was explored. A summary of the discussion includes:

- Determining your base rate by assessing your everyday expenses and working backwards to ensure you are being fair to yourself. A great tool to do this is Dave Ramsey's budgeting tool [How to budget with an irregular income](#), although he has many other resources. These can be accessed on his site for [free](#);
- Building a long-term client relationship, ensuring word-of-mouth and future referrals – suggestions were sending flowers after a graduation, for example, and humanising

the relationship to make clients more comfortable in ensuring there is, in fact, a person at the other end of the 'line';

- AI tools can be useful in getting jobs, managing time and projects, and even gaining international employment to earn Dollars, such as Cactus Communications;
- Several books were recommended for all freelancers, each with its own useful suggestion on how to improve both presentation, language and marketing of a freelance business. Titles include *The artful edit*, by Susan Bell, *Freelance like a Boss*, by Shea Karssing and *The freelance editor's handbook*, by Suzy Bills; and
- Another great tip was using TaalKraal to connect and find jobs as it is "An African languages kraal where we share resources, tools and training through ubuntu. Many languages, one voice!"

Many thanks to all who joined and made this event so insightful. The next meeting will be a networking/year-end event. We hope to see even more members there!

Should you be interested, a more detailed summary of this event can be found [here](https://tinyurl.com/y9n4xvav) (<https://tinyurl.com/y9n4xvav>).



Attendees at this get-together were (clockwise):

Coen van Wyk,
Alexis Grewan,
Louise Greyling,
Diana Rabie,
Mark Taylor,
Marielle Tappan,
Nathi Gule,



29 November event

In an unexpected break from all the rain that has many of us considering an investment in jet skis and paddle boats, 12 freelancers banded together for a lively networking session at the very aptly named DRAMA restaurant in Pretoria on the 29 November.

We celebrated the close of what has been a very challenging, rewarding, frustrating and eventful 2025 with wonderful connections made and great advice shared amongst the group. As one attendee, AB Heyns, mentioned:

"Thank you for a wonderful morning ... I did not expect to be sharing valuable insights on a range of relevant topics but it was time well spent. I expected to encounter what a friend calls 'grysbroek Du Plooy's' – a term she coined to refer to dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrats – and instead met what I perceive to be creative, open-minded and engaging people."

What is clear after this event is the sheer importance of having a group of people who understand what it is like to be alone on an island, working from home or without a steady 9–5. How do we cope with the lack of cash flow in the slow months? Do you also have that little voice in the back of your head whispering

Attendees were (clockwise):

Paul Bedford, AB Heyns, Marielle Tappan,
Amie Hunter, Mark Taylor, Alexis Grewan,
Pule Mohotsi, Kevin Walker,
Ferdinand Gernandt, Carol O'Brien,
Caro Rayner, Niki Rayner

that you are, in fact, an impostor? How do you get reviews and feedback from your clients?

While we all know that freelancing can be a lonely career choice, we do not need to be alone! Safrea will be hosting more of these events in 2026, and freelancers from all walks of life are welcome. Some of the fields that joined this past event ranged from our more typical freelancing careers, such as photography, editing, screenwriting and journalism, to some fresher and more "Fourth Industrial Revolution" friendly fields, such as administration, team and project management, PR and even an animation generalist.

We here at the Gauteng North Region of Safrea wish you all a wonderful festive season, with well-deserved rest and a fresh wave of clients for 2026. See you all in the New Year!

Marielle Tappan

News from around the Regions

Gauteng South

12 September event

Gauteng South members gathered for a breakfast and networking session in a garden setting on Friday 12 September. The meeting was abuzz with conversation as soon as people arrived.

Some of the members are writers, two with niches in science writing, others are podcast and news producers. It was unanimous that the greatest value of Safrea memberships is networking and job leads.

There was a request for Safrea to play a greater lobbying role in overdue unpaid accounts.



12 December event

Lively debate at Gauteng South Year-End brunch

After an enthusiastic response to the Year-End social event, receiving nine positive replies, the turnout was very disappointing with only four (including myself) present. The three members who joined me were Gillian Anstey, Kimberley Mutandiro and Peter Ucko.

The low attendance was especially disappointing, given that feedback from the previous event indicated a desire for more networking/ social opportunities. Despite

the small number of people present, the conversation was lively. Integrity was one of the points discussed, covering punctuality as a vital point for some, and working for a monetary value that is commensurate with value and experience for others.

One example was that the temptation to compromise your work ethic when working for low pay is hard to resist and may result in missing deadlines or slipping up on communicating with clients.

We also discussed the Safrea rebranding proposal, and members agreed that this was not the way to go. The consensus was to get back to basics and deliver the value of prior years, where the 'Oracle' was active, social events were subsidised, and workshops were a value add.

The conversation turned to such varied topics as global politics and poor service delivery from gyms, medical aids and cell phone networks.

Iza Grek

News from around the Regions

Western Cape North

25 October event

Fostering connection and opportunity among Safreans

The recent Safrea Western Cape North meeting at Plato Coffee in Durbanville was a wonderful reminder of the power and potential of coming together as a community.

In a relaxed and warm environment, seasoned freelancers and media professionals shared laughter, stories, and reflections.

Beyond the similarities in our work and passions, what stood out was the importance of truly knowing what each member does, because understanding our diverse skills and projects opens doors to better collaboration, whether it's sharing opportunities, hiring peers, or partnering on creative projects.

This kind of connection fosters reliability, a foundation for nurturing a strong and trusting community among Western Cape Safreans. When we gather regularly, we not only network but build genuine relationships that help us pass work to one another or bring in collaborators who enhance what we each do.



We agreed that the real strength of Safrea lies in the committed individuals who consistently show up and add value.

These members believe in the community we've pledged to grow and nurture. It is their dedication and shared vision that will ensure Safrea thrives as a vibrant and supportive home for freelancers in the Western Cape.

As we move forward, let's keep these meetups spaces of open dialogue and shared warmth and genuine connection with each other.

Let's keep collaborating, learning about each other's talents, and embracing the power of community because together, we will thrive and grow stronger.

Noni Sophe

WCSJ2025 highlights

The World Conference of Science Journalists 2025, held 1–5 December at the CSIR International Convention Centre in Pretoria was a huge success. A full report will follow once the numbers are finalised, but here are some visuals to give you an idea of the buzz, the engagement and the excitement

All pics courtesy of WCSJ2025



Conference director Engela Duvénage with the Minister and Deputy Director-General, Daan du Toit



Delegates came from all over the world. Here an Argentinian delegate points to her own country on the cloud of countries involved



SASJA had its own stand in the exhibition hall

Higher Education Minister Professor Blade Nzimande opened the conference with a rousing speech very supportive of science journalism



Teatime gave people a chance to share notes and network





The excellent food is always a highlight at CSIR conferences



The CSIR staff choir performing a very moving rendition of the national anthem



A range of fascinating sessions made for difficult choices for delegates



The three keynote speakers added their own special messages. On Day 2, it was Dr David Obura, of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

Introducing our **Photographer of the Month:** Marinda Louw Coetzee

Food scientist, compostmaker, agriculturalist, photojournalist. Progressing (I hope!) through the cycles of employment and personal growth, I have always loved beauty and looking at life from various angles.

Photography started more than 30 years ago with one of those flat flip-open Kodak numbers and I have taken photos of friends, functions, family and foreign things ever since. My repertoire – expanded by my work as a journalist – includes weddings and funerals, people and products, interiors for guesthouses, agriculture, and lots of travel photography.

Pictures on these pages and on our front and back cover by Marinda Louw Coetzee





Wrapping up 2025, with 2026 waiting under the Christmas tree

Practical insights and 'thinking prompts' for freelance creatives looking to close out the year with a clear assessment of their work and a realistic plan for what comes next.

Before you can wrap your head around November, December is here and 2026 right behind it! Even if you're not one for new year resolutions, the end of the year is a natural inflection point that can prompt reflection and – its cousin – goal setting. This isn't just an exercise for us as individuals, but also as professionals. Freelancing can feel terribly laissez faire at times – exempt from the KPIs and forecasting we associate with bigger businesses – but this is one element worth cribbing from corporate.

Mad season

With apologies to that ol' Xmas jingle: it's the most manic time of the year. December is often more tiring than tinsel. Client deadlines collide with personal commitments, school holidays overlap with quarter-end, and it is tempting to push through without pause. Doing so, however, means you're at risk of stealing time and productivity from Future You. Not taking time out and working on your "off days" are both highly correlated with burnout. Rest is often undervalued in freelance life, but it is crucial. Creativity depends on mental space and emotional capacity, both of which are eroded when work becomes relentless.

Tip: Mark time out in shared calendars, and warn clients that you won't be available. The hard part will be sticking to it, but clients that consistently push these boundaries tend to disrespect you in other ways too.

Prioritise properly

If your deliverables outnumber your on-days, it's always worth flagging this with a client as early as possible and asking about shifting things. Prioritise time-sensitive tasks and ask (politely) if some things can be pushed to January. If everything is a priority, effectively nothing is. And remember, most of us are not saving lives here.

Tip: List out your deliverables and their deadlines. Highlight those that aren't time-sensitive, and propose realistic new deadlines for these. Your client is more likely to acquiesce if you go in to these discussions armed with a plan.

Planning is working

Working on your own business – your branding, website, client communications, and goals – may not be immediately income generating, but it shouldn't be dismissed as unproductive. Let the end of the year be a handy reminder to make time for these tasks, including simply daydreaming about the kind of work you want to do more of.

Tip: Write your own naughty or nice lists. What did you do well this year? What are you proud of? Where did you drop the ball? What clients were more hassle than reward? Who is your favourite client, and why? Is it about exciting commissions or consistent pay? Do you have a unicorn that ticks both boxes? It can feel 'naff' but taking the time to puzzle these out will provide the clarity needed to set you up for a great 2026. And if nothing else, you'll be clearer on who doesn't deserve your 'instinctive yes' next time they ask for miracles.

Know your flow

Do you know what a typical year looks like for your freelance business? Before you can set goals – financial or otherwise – it's important to be realistic about your 'base line' of output and income.

Freelancing used to have a predictable ebb and flow for me. I'd aim to make 12 months income in ten months work – with December, half of Jan, and half of April quiet enough to be considered "the dead zones" of the year. The bulk of my commissions were from magazines, many of which had combined Jan-Feb editions or

took a two-week publishing break over the Christmas-New Year stretch. When your output is your income, slow periods can be hard on the budget, but with the sparkling clarity of hindsight, I confess I miss the mandatory rest this offered. Now I have the opposite 'problem': It never stops. While the extra income is very welcome, carving time out is harder. Either way, recognising and planning for any trends you can tease out will help you prepare.

Tip: If you've been freelancing two or more years, map your income over time so you can see the trends in the data. Break it down monthly so you can see January v January.

In the graph below (filled with imaginary data, I assure you!) you can see how even though average income per year is higher each year (tax year running Mar to Feb), there's a dip in the trend line around December before things ramp up again. Knowledge is power!

Setting goals

Goals do not need to be grand to be meaningful. You might want to develop a new service, seek a different calibre of client, or reserve more time for personal creative work. Choose a small number of these and outline the steps that will support them. If you're not inclined to chasing targets or goals that feel limiting or negative (eg "I will stop this..." or "No more XYZ"), trying making a list of what you want to add into your

year, (eg more collaboration, more public speaking, more NGO clients, etc).

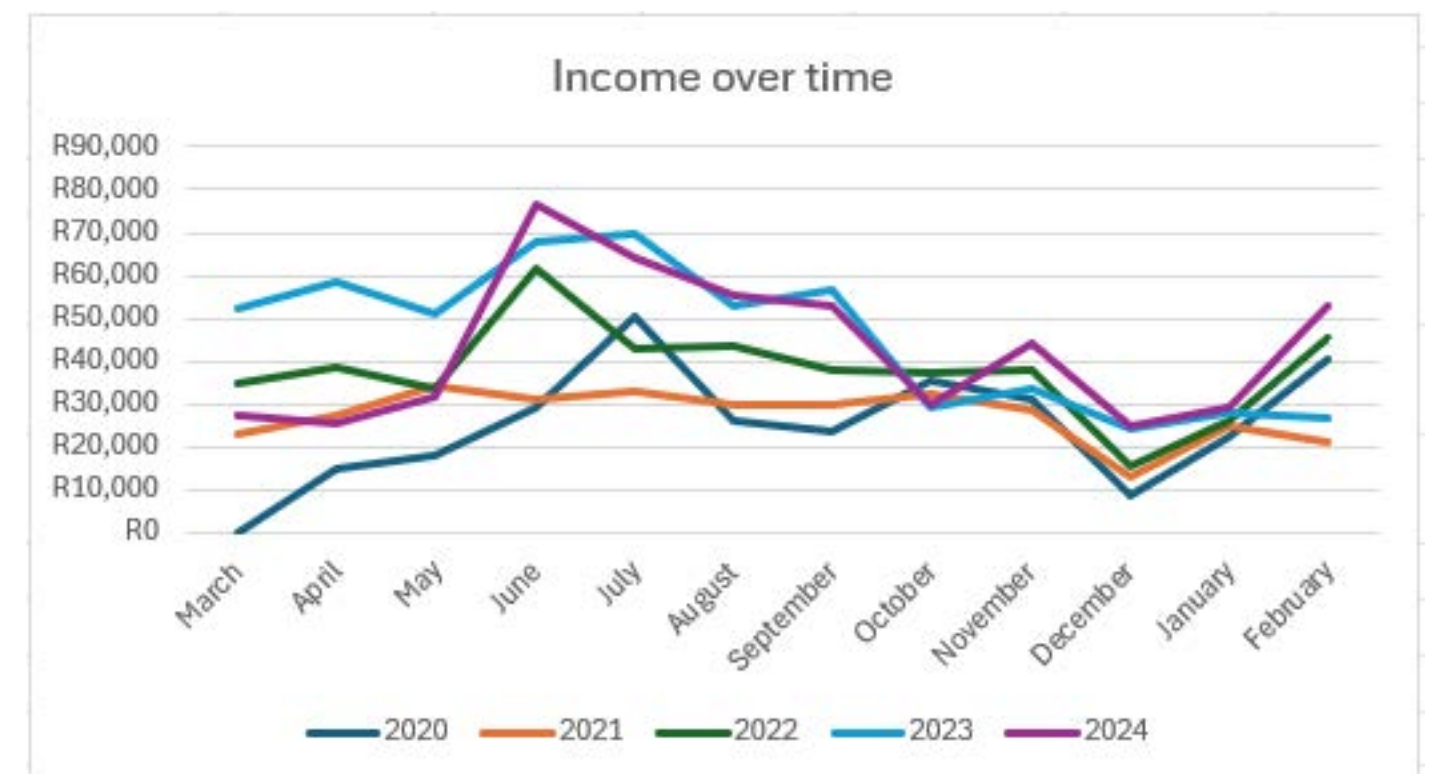
If your goals are financial, now is the time to think about upping your rates. Costs of living, software subscriptions and professional development expenses shift over time, and your rates should reflect both your financial realities and the value you deliver.

Tip: I tend to communicate new rates to clients in Jan or Feb, making them effective from the new tax year (1 Mar for me). A modest adjustment – supported by clear communication with advance notice – is often well received by clients. It signals professionalism and helps sustain your business. For fixed rate ("lump it or leave it" clients) – I'm looking at you, SA newspapers and magazines – can you shift things in other ways, like word counts or commissions regularity? Can your editor put you in contact with another publication in the stable?

Merry merry to you!

As you close out the year, make room for both reflection and forward planning. Freelancing is challenging and, in my experience, always evolving. The best case scenario is deliberate rest, a clear review of what's working, and a realistic plan for the year ahead, so you can enter the new year on the right foot. But, don't let perfectionist tendencies stop you from even trying. Remember, any rest or fanciful daydreaming is better than nothing.

Kate Thompson Davy



Is stock photography **worth it?**

Was it ever worth it?

That's a question I'm increasingly mulling over, seeing that I've been supplying images for many years to Getty (through iStock), Dreamstime and Adobe Stock.

And making money? You must be joking! I could've made more selling pancakes at a bazaar.

Yes, there are probably photographers making good money with stock. However, I suspect their portfolios run to tens of thousands of images. My portfolio is tiny.

In the past year I've tried to expand it, which brought some new sales, but still minuscule.

And, the job is achingly time consuming. Curating one's images for submission, discarding those with visible logos or recognisable people. Or showing certain properties and artworks, such as statues. To submit such images, one needs a signed release for commercial use. Otherwise, try submitting them for editorial use.

Besides meticulously processing the images on the computer, one has to provide a heading and description for each, plus a plethora of keywords. Keywords are essential to ensure one's images will be found by some designer or illustrator somewhere in the world, looking for some specific type of image.

Occasionally, out of the blue, I get a message: "Congratulations! Yesterday you made \$0.96 – your best seller." That's the royalty fee for a download: less than one dollar!

Now AI is eating into everyone's business, even the business of photo stock. Some stock agencies don't accept AI images. Others do. So, photographers who are into AI are creating the most stunning images with a click of the mouse.

Who knows where this will take us?

Word and pictures: **Sam J Basch**



Above: Very popular: the Table Mountain cable car with Robben Island in the distant background

Facing page: Intriguingly, my best selling image: 'The culinary tradition of making South African biltong'

Below: Another of my best sellers: the Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich in London. The space at the bottom allows for text or a logo, such as for a travel agency





Having sold quite often, this image likely served to illustrate broken infrastructure or economic decline anywhere in the world



This image was declined due to the faint foreign lettering of the wrecked vessel's Chinese name

This stock image illustrates renewable energy: wind turbines. I left enough space for text



The Groot Constantia photo sells in the travel and property markets. It offers enough space for text or a logo



One of my more recent images of fresh food: our own piquanté peppers being preserved. It shows an antique deseeding tool



Trying my hand at a food set-up; supposedly home-made fish paste

Overleaf: The image of Trafalgar Square in London is borderline; it could be rejected for recognisable people and a logo

A recent image captured in the kitchen; home-made potato and leek soup



Ripe mulberries from our garden, set on a lovely hand-made plate



December BRAGS

Here are our most recent brags from our Safrea members. Well done, everyone – we’re so proud of you! Keep the Safrea light burning bright. If you have an achievement to brag about, please let us know at newsletter@safrea.co.za

Melody Emmett has submitted her article *Composing the future*, which was published in the *Mail & Guardian* in October. We have reproduced it in its entirety on the facing page. Congratulations, Melody!

Marinda Louw Coetzee has submitted the link to her article *Study Animal Health at TARDI*, which was published in *Farmer’s Weekly* in October. She tells us this is one part of a series about the 11 agricultural colleges in South Africa, and is expected to be a useful resource, as most people and prospective students don’t know a great deal about agricultural study options. You can read it [here](https://www.farmersweekly.co.za/opinion/study-animal-health-at-tardi/): (<https://www.farmersweekly.co.za/opinion/study-animal-health-at-tardi/>)

Adrian Galley has written in to let us know about a pro-bono project he had worked on since April, and was featured on *Carte Blanche* on 26 October.

What began as a narrative therapy project for a select cohort of Medium B prisoners transformed into a full-scale theatre production.

The poster is reproduced on the right. [Here’s Carte Blanche’s teaser](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=easrzTzygf8): (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=easrzTzygf8>)

Want to grab some of the spotlight? Here’s your chance.

Send in your Brags and we’ll publish them in the next Safrea Newsletter!



Friday

Blending jazz, classical and South African influences, this concert is a bold new commission that challenges boundaries and delights audiences

Melody Emmett

Lovers of classical/ jazz music are in for a rare treat with the debut performance of *Variations on Cantaloupe Island* to be held on Sunday 12 October at the Shed & Silo in Benoni.

In another first, the Mzansi Chamber Music Collective (MCMC) commissioned the multi-award-winning composer Conrad Asman to write music specifically tailored to the extraordinary talents of classical saxophonist, Josie McClure.

A graduate of the Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag in the Netherlands, McClure came second in the International Woodwind Competition in Bloemfontein. Her prize was a concert with the MCMC.

“This concert is very special to my heart,” says the MCMC’s creative director and well-known pianist, Eugene Joubert.

He believes there needs to be more consciousness of contemporary South African compositions and works of different genres among South African audiences.

From the MCMC’s perspective, he says, “To be able to commission a work for piano and saxophone, or for piano and trio, or for cello and violin, whatever it is, as we move forward as the collective it has been very special. And we have been really fortunate to have come across Conrad Asman.”

Asman, whose works have been performed in Africa, Asia, Europe and America, is pursuing a doctoral degree in music at the Royal Academy of Music in the UK.

His musical influences range from classical to jazz to Afropop: Mozart, Ligeti, Thomas Adès, Charlie Parker, Herbie Hancock and Dizzy Gillespie.

Everybody from Nigerian Afropop superstar Fela Kuti to the Kenyan nyhatiti player Ayub Ogada to South African composer and pianist Surendran Reddy were among the names he mentioned.

“My Spotify playlist is hilariously jumbled, with a Brahms piano trio followed by a crazy jazz bebop band,” says Asman. “It’s not organised at all and I love it. I’m always looking for new things.”

Asman and McClure engaged virtually between the UK and the Netherlands to shape the new composition. When McClure said she liked music that was “really energetic and fast”, there was an immediate rapport between the two young South Africans.

“Josie has done incredible things in South Africa and in the Netherlands,” says Asman. “When you have a saxophone player like Josie and a pianist like Eugene, who are very talented and very skilled, you want to be able to write a piece that’s specifically tailored for them.”

“We exchanged lots of WhatsApps. Josie would record a little of her playing and then I would do a bit of tweaking and we have been lucky to have had a lot of time to shape this piece into what it is.”

McClure says the music was written “idiomatically” by a composer who understands the saxophone well. Asman included a technique known as “whistle tones”, which McClure asked him to change.

“He wanted me to bite down on

Composing the future



Blown away: Josie McClure will be performing in *Variations on Cantaloupe Island* on 12 October at the Shed & Silo in Benoni.



Contemporary: *Variations on Cantaloupe Island* composer Conrad Asman (left) and pianist Eugene Joubert.

the reed to create these very high overtones and I asked him to change that.” Apart from that, McClure said, she didn’t have much feedback.

“It’s a very colourful work.”

“Josie has quite a lot of extended techniques that are not traditional sounds that one would hear on a saxophone and I think, as difficult as these things are to deliver in a performance, that is what makes it so exciting,” Joubert says.

“It’s a challenge but it’s also a really fascinating melting pot.”

Variations on Cantaloupe Island was inspired by jazz pianist Toby Hancock. Describing the music, Asman said it consists of variations of the same melody.

There is an introductory section in which the saxophonist “emerges from nothing with very gentle tapping sounds that are not really pitch-specific”. This is followed by an interlude between the piano and the saxophone in which the main theme from *Variations on Cantaloupe Island* is sounded, Asman explains.

“I’ve had a wonderful time studying and learning *Variations on Cantaloupe Island*,” Joubert says, although he explains that it took him



some time to understand Asman’s compositional style and sensibility and the way that he treats the piano.

Both Asman and McClure displayed their interest in, and gift for, music at a young age.

Asman recalls wanting to play Celine Dion’s *My Heart Will Go On* as a child. His piano teacher told him that he was too young; his hands were not big enough to reach the octave spreads. However, he moved the notes around and changed the harmony.

“I think that was the first instance of me wanting to do more creation than rehearsing.”

Originally from Johannesburg, Asman moved to Cape Town to study at the South African College of Music. Although he enjoyed playing the piano at university, and managed to play some decent repertoire, composition became more important.

“I never regretted taking piano. It was hugely, hugely useful, and I still play from time to time, but not professionally — unless someone needs me to.”

In 2018, Asman won the Southern African Music Rights Organisation Overseas Scholarship, which enabled him to study at the Royal Academy of

Music in London.

On his return, he was composer in residence for the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra.

Last year, he wrote the music for the controversial short opera, *Trial by Media* about the Oscar Pistorius murder trial for the Cape Town Opera. In between these landmarks, and subsequently, he has taken on a number of other commissions.

McClure’s first exposure to music was at school where she took an interest in playing the trumpet.

She wanted to take the exam but was told she wasn’t good enough and would fail.

The rebuff fuelled her determination and she won a trophy for having the highest marks. The trumpet teacher, Renier Strydom, became her first saxophone teacher.

“He taught me how to love music and had a huge influence on my career,” she says.

She was in grade five or six when she got her first saxophone — an old Yamaha. Much later, she was able to buy the Yamaha Custom saxophone she still plays today.

An ongoing challenge has been the absence of classical saxophonists in South Africa.

Professor Liam Burden at Stellenbosch University was her mainstay. He helped her to find and tested music to something new. “Many people associate South African composers with inaccessible music and we have tried to show them that this is not always true, although new music may not be immediately accessible, if you make a bit of effort to listen attentively, it can be a very enriching experience,” Joubert says.

“We want South African audiences to trust us enough so that they know that, even if they come to a concert not knowing what the music will be, they know it will be something worth listening to.”

I think there is an appetite among South African audiences for the unusual and we are very happy that we can expose them to unusual music and fill that gap.

arc to it, he explains. “Each variation pulls on the next.”

For Asman, it is important that players — and audiences — are drawn into his music rather than pushed away, even if it is emotionally challenging. “Musicians put in hours and hours of their lives to learn the music and become involved with it,” he says. “They need to feel that it is worth the effort and musically rewarding for them.”

“I think there is an appetite among South African audiences for the unusual and we are very happy that we can expose them to unusual music and fill that gap.”

For the MCMC, commissioning composers like Asman is an extension of moving away from tried and tested music to something new.

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