



SUPERHEROES. Safura Abdool Karim, left, became a lawyer to 'fix' things that go wrong in the health sector, encouraged from an early age by her mom, Quarraisha Abdool Karim, inset centre, and her dad, Professor Salim Abdool Karim. Pictures: Supplied/GCIS

Following in the family's footsteps

SAFURA ABDOOL KARIM, DAUGHTER OF DOCTORS, TAKES LEGAL ROUTE TO ACTIVISM

Amanda Watson

For many people there is a single lightbulb moment which defines how you're going to live your life, and for Safura Abdool Karim, daughter of professors Quarraisha Abdool Karim and Salim Abdool Karim, it was no different.

"I became a lawyer because of my mom," says Safura, who is currently a senior researcher and health lawyer at Priceless SA, the South African Medical Research Council Centre for Health Economics and Decision Science.

"My parents were quite heavily involved in the activism against Aids denialism in the early 2000s and in particular the Treatment Action Campaign, which fought to have nevirapine made available as a treatment for people in hospitals.

"My mom provided the main evidentiary affidavit for that case which provided the key impacts the failure to provide nevirapine was having on HIV infection rates in young women.

"I think I was six or seven years old when I came home, and my mom was surrounded by paper. She just looked so stressed and busy and I asked if I could help her with anything," Safura says.

Safura's mother gave her a piece of paper with numbers on it to add up and make sure the totals tallied.

"After I had done so, I asked my mom what it was, and she told me those were the numbers of women who were getting HIV because they didn't have

access to nevirapine," says Safura.

"I had known a lot about these things because I had grown up around it. She said to me the doctors can't do anything, but the lawyers are superheroes, they're going to fix it, and that's why I became a lawyer."

A life in activism may have been inevitable for the young Safura and her siblings, Aisha and Wasim, but they have flourished under their parents' light instead of wilting under the shadow caused by their achievements.

As a public health lawyer, Safura looks at how law can be used as a health intervention in and of itself to improve health at a population level.

"So when you are thinking about changing eating, or drinking, you're already talking about changing laws which apply quite broadly as well.

"There are legal instruments which can cause harm to people's health, so I don't just look at what new laws you can use, I also look at how you can undo the legal system to improve people's health."

Safura noted that public health and corporate interest had historically been at odds with each other.

"If you think back to the HIV crisis, yes, the denialism policy of the government of the day was a big challenge.

"The affordability of medicine was also a huge challenge and that's where public health began, fighting big pharmaceutical companies to make ARV's more affordable.

"Much of how we live our lives is determined by corporations and their interests are not the same as ours," says Safura.

For her, the current pandemic has

shown the healthier the population of a country the less the impact and that health should be taking a greater role in the world going forward.

Noting the virus severely impacted people with underlying health conditions and, aside from tuberculosis and HIV, Safura explains other conditions include cancer, diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular issues.

"If we make our population more broadly healthier then that is also a key part of pandemic preparedness," Safura says.

The great inequalities in South Africa presents a massive challenge to improving health however, which is where Safura's role at Priceless SA comes in.

"We look at how these decisions around health should be made, how do you prioritise what we should be investing in, what are the wins we can have which the most cost-effective," says Safura.

"They may benefit fewer people but save us money in the long run which can be put to use to help those who really need it and ease the burden on healthcare systems."

As head of Health Minister Dr Zwelinzima Mkhize's 45-member ministerial advisory committee – all of whom are volunteering their time and expertise – Professor Salim Abdool Karim is an internationally renowned epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist.

He became a household name in this country after his presentation on the novel coronavirus this week.

Intensely proud of her family, Safura was quick to remind people that her

mother, National Research Foundation A-rated research scientist Professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim, who was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe (bronze) for her work in HIV/Aids research among other honours, is also serving on the committee.

"It's an interesting house to live in, we're all doing different things related to Covid-19," Safura says with a laugh.

"We were joking the other day that only one person in our house has published a paper on Covid-19 and it's actually my brother, Wasim, who works for the KwaZulu-Natal Research Innovation and Sequencing Platform at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

"They created a tool for sequence analysis of the virus which was published in the *Journal of Bioinformatics and Computational Biology* and before my dad was chairing the inter-ministerial committee, my sister, Aisha, was one of the lead journalists at the Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism doing stories on Covid-19."

Safura has been no slouch either, highlighting possible pending issues around affordability of a virus vaccine, should one be discovered, criminalisation of the intentional spread of the virus, how to assist people in prisons, and supporting the ban on liquor sales.

"It's a fun house to be in. My parents are at the coalface and I'm extremely proud of them, but I'm super proud of everybody in my house, it's really special," says Safura.

"My family and I want to help insofar and as much as we can. We all have different skills sets and are trying to use them in the best ways to help manage this pandemic." – news@citizen.co.za