

From hardship to being a leader

Keitumetse

One moment we were a happy family with lots of dreams and visions. We were never separated and everything we did, we did together. It was all good as my dad was the only person who worked and my mother did not. She did not want anything to keep her away from her children. My father too wanted to be with his children, but he had no choice but to put bread on the table. As a happy Christian family we never thought a dark cloud would pay us an unpleasant visit.

We woke with smiles on our faces every day. In our mother's beautiful eyes, body and soul we were fragile and she would go an extra mile to make sure our school work was always up to date. As a first born child I had dreams of how I wanted my life to be when I grew up. I never thought my dreams would be shattered. I always had my parent's interest in me. Every time I thought about how I would make my parents happy. I wanted a fantasy life for them.

That Friday the sky was crystal clear and blue, the sun bright and shiny, its rays coming through our windows, so that we could feel its heat in our house. My mother was preparing us for school. We were excited as it was the last day of wearing school uniforms. After our first meal of the day she kissed us, wishing us the best day ahead. I noticed the grass peacefully green, the dew sparkling and shiny like diamonds. I felt it was going to be the best day ever.

After school I started to feel knots in my stomach. I did not notice that this was a sign from our visitor. When I got home I expected to find my mother. To my surprise I learnt she was next door—at our neighbour's house. These neighbours were close family friends.

I heard a voice saying 'your mother is in here, come.' I found my mother sleeping peacefully on the puffy carpet on the dining room floor. I started to wake her up because I had bought snacks at school which I knew she loved. But she never woke up. I tried and tried but I got no answer.

Our visitor had already come and gone without us seeing him/her. All he/she took from the children was the milk. He/she milked all the milk from our mother's breast. Leaving pain where there was happiness. Bringing discomfort. Leaving the streets of our township as dry as a dehydrated ocean, its plants dying, like there was now a desert. The tears shed were enough to fill an ocean.

Years went by and at the age of 13 things started to change for me, from bad to worse. As a teenager peer pressure was leading the way. I thought I was old enough to make decisions. I forgot where I came from and where I was heading. I started to have boyfriends and up-to-no-good friends. Life became easier now. Or so I told myself. At the same time it was depressing. I had started my menstrual cycle. I could not tell my father as he was a man and I did not know where to start. I did not understand it completely myself.

I did not notice that the worst was still to come my way. I started smoking, thinking this was a good thing which made me relax. Yet I was digging a big hole for myself. When my dad told us that alcohol is bad I thought he was trying to prevent us from tasting something my friends said was the most delicious thing on earth. I started stealing money from home to buy alcohol and cigarettes, to make my friends happy. So that they would think I am the coolest girl to hang out with.

My father did not give up hope on me. He gave me tough love. He found a centre where I could take up a hobby in my spare time. I thought he did not love me. In my eyes he was removing me from my best buddies. He hates me, I said to myself. I never said this out



loud. I just kept it inside me. All he was doing was protecting me as he loved me. I knew all my life that he loved me and just wanted the best for me and my brother, as he was the only parent we had after that dark cloud took our other parent.

One afternoon I took my friend to a place called the Y Centre to watch a basketball game. I loved watching people playing basketball and I never thought I would be one of the girls playing. I started playing basketball and I also took classes in different subjects. One class was about peer pressure. I started enjoying going to the Y Centre because the people there were open and shared things with us. They talked about alcohol and drug abuse, relationships, sex – things I could not talk to my father about. I thought when I am done here I will pass this knowledge to my peers.

In grade 10 I started attending workshops to learn more. During the week after school I formed groups to discuss things affecting us on a daily basis. By the age of 18 I was already seeing things in a different way.

There I was sitting under a tree on a hot day. It was summer and all the reptiles were out of their hiding spots. Days, weeks, months, years had passed without my virginity being broken. I looked back and realized that if it were not for this guy by the name of Jabu, I would not be here today. He was a friend, a mentor, a shoulder to cry on. He was like an angel sent to help out.

Jabu was the same age as me. We used to play together when we were young. I always teased him because I thought I was better than him. Just because he came from a poor family. Not knowing that the same person I always teased was the one who will carry me and show me the light. Now at eighteen we were close friends. Some people started to gossip that we were dating and the story spread until my elders heard about it. They stopped us seeing each other. It was hard but I could not overrule their decision. I had to

stop the friendship. As a friend he thought it best to introduce me to the Group of other teens, because he could not be there for me anymore.

Months went by without seeing my friend Jabu. Despite what happened between us I never gave up attending this group and I became a better person. I was proud of myself and the work I was doing. I was happy.

A year later I went to a workshop in Gallagher Estate about teens and the hardships they faced in daily life. To my surprise, when I got there with members of our group, I saw that this was a big, beautiful place. We met with youth from other places and we introduced ourselves. There was this guy who kept looking at me but I was not sure if I knew him. He was tall, handsome and the way he was dressed – his respectable suit, black shoes, tie, white shirt, gold watch–looked like he was of the top management. As he started to come to the section where I was seated, I could see that he looked familiar. By the way he was smiling I could tell he was not a stranger.

‘Hello’, he said. I replied ‘Hello, do I know you from somewhere?’ Then my memory started to work. ‘Oh!’ I said with a smile, ‘Jabu?!’ He laughed warmly, ‘Yes it is me Keitumetse!’ He hugged me. I said to him ‘I never thought I would see you again in my life.’ He replied ‘I can see you are still doing okay. How is life in general?’ I told him things are working out. When I held his left hand I felt a ring on his finger. He told me yes, he is married. It was early in his life for such a commitment but I could see he was happy. I paused. He wanted to explain but I said there was nothing to explain, I understood. Things were also working out for me now. My complicated life was now uncomplicated as I was always happy and surrounded by people who loved and cared for me. It was good to see someone from a long time ago, but life goes on.

I started to volunteer at the orphanage called Thato Kematla which means Education is Power. When I turned 20 I got lucky and found a job as store manager at SPAR. I managed to put food on the table. I worked there until I was 25 when the shop closed due to the financial crisis.

I stayed at home a whole year. The following year I got into a project called Masiba Mbane Youth Development Project (MYDP). We would go to schools and recruit children around Orange Farm Secondary Schools – from grades 8 to 12. We taught them life skills, crafts, team building, dancing and other subjects. The main thing was to give them tools so that even if they came across difficulties in life they would be able to use these skills and apply them.

I became very happy when I saw the impact of my work with the children. It is what we call ‘giving back to the community’. Despite all that happened to me and family we are here. I am 27 years old and life has treated me with so much. I am happy again.

