

14 Times a Woman

Indigenous Stories

From the Heart

'Girls leading change'

Sandisiwe Gaiza, Zethu Jiyana, Melissa Lufele, Zamahlubi Mabhengu, Bongiwe Maome, Bongiwe Mhambi, Lelethu Mlobeli, Asisipho Mntonga, Takatso Mohlomi, Wandiswa Momoza, Happy Mthethwa, Elethu Ntsethe, Zikhona Tshiwula, Thina Kamnqa

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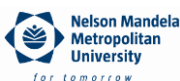
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**Then the time came when the risk it took
To remain tight in the bud was more painful
Than the risk it took to blossom.**

Elizabeth Appell (1979)

Where the stories begin ...

All women have stories to tell. Our collective story begins when we - three university professors - started working on a project entitled, *“Digital media for change and well-being: Girl-led ‘from the ground up’ policy-making in addressing sexual violence at a South African university”* with a group of young black South African first-year women university students from rural areas. The initiative was part of a larger project, *“Networks for change and well-being: Girl-led ‘from the ground up’ policy-making in addressing sexual violence in Canada and South Africa”*. We sent an email to all the first-year education women students at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University who were from rural areas and waited to see who would take up our offer to participate in the two-year-long project. Initially, one student, Zethu, came, and she invited others whom she saw usually on the bus en route to Bizana, a small rural town in the South African province of Eastern Cape.

As part of the *“Digital media for change and well-being: Girl-led ‘from the ground up’ policy-making in addressing sexual violence at a South African university”* project the young women came together regularly over 18 months to explore critical issues related to sexual violence especially on the campus itself. They worked to produce photo images and created cellphilms about the situation for young women in the residences and in other parts of the campus. And they took action, producing policy posters and action briefs which as a group they presented to various policy makers on campus. They also had opportunities to participate in feminist dialogues elsewhere in the country.

Their collective stories and group initiatives told through photos and cellphilms were very powerful in opening up a space in which stories about a range of topics including sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, bullying at school, poverty, and other social justice issues could be told. Because we had all worked together over a period of time, it meant that there was a safe space to begin to see that these collective stories come out of individual life stories. Following the idea of “we all have a story”,

we organized a retreat at the Conference Centre where we had regularly met to engage in various digital projects.

We started the retreat by emphasizing the idea that we all have a life story. As we highlighted in the workshop, a life story is a personal account of all the important events and experiences that have contributed to our becoming who we are today. Because our life story explains how we became who we are, it plays a significant role in shaping the way we define (and perceive) ourselves: (<http://spldbch.blogspot.com/2011/10/personal-life-story.html>).

From there we went to looking at other people's stories. It was important to show how other people - women and men, girls and boys - have written autobiographical stories, so we showed them works such as *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy, A childhood memoir* (Chris van Wyk); *In touch* (Buyi Mbambo); *I am Malala, The girl who stood up for education and was shot by the Taliban* (Malala Yusafzai); and *Nervous Conditions* (Tsitsi Dangarembga). We also used more academic works like *Resilience: Portraits of a new South Africa* by Stephen Elliot and Marisa Barnett; *Women on purpose* compiled by Kim Berman and Jane Hassinger; and Claudia's earlier work with youth in Cape Town, *In My Life*. We then drew on the simple technique of having these young women use a timeline to write about some of the most important events and experiences that have contributed to their becoming *who they are today*. We started by encouraging them to identify significant moments in their lives.

Following a structured but reflexive approach, we asked them to write a brief piece capturing their biographical information. We invited them to choose one significant moment, as it were, about which they wanted to write, and to do so in approximately 500 words. They read this to the group and invited responses from its members. This enabled each writer, in drawing on the comments from the group, to reflect on her story and revise it so as to strengthen it. They were invited to choose further moments, write about them, read them to the group, and revise their stories. In this

way they developed episodes which they could combine into one story, for which they then worked on creating a title.

We acknowledge that this work on the self is emotionally taxing and that it took, necessarily, more time than we had at our disposal. We were able to get the young women to work with only two moments, with further work needing to be done in the future. Wanting to share the stories of the fourteen women in a publication, we asked them to come up with a title for the book. They listed various titles and then voted on the one they thought would hold the essence of their stories; *14 Times a woman: Indigenous stories from the heart* emerged as the title.

In this book we offer the autobiographical pieces that enabled these young women to reflect on the experiences which made them into *who they are today*. We see this as work in progress to which they can return so as to extend and modify it as they deepen their own understanding of themselves and of the paths they took then and those they want to take. We thank them for giving us the opportunity to experience their telling of their stories.

Naydene de Lange, Relebohile Moletsane, Claudia Mitchell

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Zamahlubi Mabhengu

I am Zamahlubi Mabhengu, born on 2 July 1994 in Qaukeni village in Lusikisiki.

I am the sixth child out of nine. I went to Emzintlava Junior Secondary School in 2001. I passed Grade 9 in 2009 at the same school. I attended high school at Toli Senior Secondary School and completed my matric in 2012. I started at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2013 and now I am doing my 4th year Bachelor of Education, hoping to finish it in 2016.



The power of words

I can remember the noise, laughter, and shouting of learners playing outside the classroom. It was break time, I was seated in my Grade 2 class facing the window. A boy rushed in and slapped me, accusing me of staring at him. I took a deep breath but no words could explain my pain through my tears. He was not one of my classmates but a bully from another grade. I did not understand why all of this was happening to me. I was being bullied by some of my classmates and this boy from another class also came and hit me. I concluded that something was wrong with me or that it was because I was from a poor family and did not have a uniform and I would go to school barefoot, carrying my books in 'Buy Boxer' store plastic bags with no lunch box or pocket money. We were all suffering

from poverty so I did not know what made me different from them. That was a question I asked myself.

Among the learners who used to bully me, I remember this short, strong boy. One day when we were in Grade 4 he asked why everything about me was such a mess. He commented on my hair not being cut, and said that I was ugly and fat, and he wondered why I was living. I could not respond; instead I cried, feeling the pain of being emotionally abused and discriminated against because of factors that I could not control. I could no longer walk with my head up and I lost confidence bit by bit. I developed poor self-esteem and I also believed that I did not deserve to live, and I cried almost every day of my schooling. I would feel good at home only.

I reported this matter to my teachers but there was no change because some teachers did not really care. When the bully was punished, I had to run home after school because if I did not he would beat me just for reporting him. I did not tell my parents. I used to spend my time reading my sister's novels and my books just to keep myself from thinking about school. I did well in school because that was the only way that I could show that I was a good human being and able to pass classwork and tests with great marks. It was the same year that my dream of being a teacher was born. I wanted to be a teacher who would teach humanity, Ubuntu, and love among learners, a teacher who would bring change in learners' lives.

I wanted to be a teacher who would encourage learners to embrace their differences, to treat them equally, and make sure no case of mistreatment of learners went unattended.

Everything happens for a reason

Going to university and pursuing a degree in education had been my dream ever since I was in grade four. I made sure I did well in high school so that I could go to university. I passed Grade 12 and was accepted at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. I was excited about leaving home and going to Port Elizabeth, but that excitement only lasted till the day before heading to Port Elizabeth. I became emotional and cried because I did not believe that this was really happening. On the morning of departure I cried a lot and so did my mother, but I had to hold it together and be strong for her because she was worried as she had no clue about the place I was going to. I remember carrying one large grey bag and large shopping bag known as “No problem bag” that had all my things I would need. On my way to Port Elizabeth I realised how important my parents were, as I needed them to tell me that everything would be fine. I was terrified and thought of not leaving them. I did not know anyone in Port Elizabeth, but my mother made arrangements for me to stay over with a senior student who had a good heart. The next morning she took me to the university to check my residence application status and lucky for me, I was accepted and got a room and lovely roommate.

My first year at varsity was hard and challenging. Firstly, both my parents were not employed and they still are not, but they gave me the little they could. My big sister was very supportive too, but I could not afford new clothes that fitted the varsity environment. I was busy comparing myself with other students and I ended up looking down at myself. I was scared to interact with other students because I felt different to them, students who had flashy clothes and who spoke the nicest English while I had nothing of that nature. The residents of student flat D and E came to my rescue as we were like a family and supported each other. It was in my first year that I met most of my friends who have helped me gain my confidence. In the same year I joined the *Girls Leading Change* research project that is fighting against gender based violence. The project empowered me to be myself. Through the dialogues we had I managed to get to know myself better and accepted the things I could not

change - like my home background - and learnt not to compare myself with anyone but instead embrace my uniqueness.

I realized that I do not need flashy clothes to be a woman but I need to believe in myself and know that I am strong enough and the struggles I have experienced have shaped me. I need to focus on the future rather than spending the time I have dwelling on the status quo. I also accepted that God had a plan with me; that I became the first person to go to university in my family so that I can change the situation.

Bongiwe Maome



I am a story that started at the Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg, on 11 June 1995.

I am the first of my mother's children and she was so proud and thankful that she named me *Bongiwe*, which translates into "thanked" in English. I started school at the Ennerdale Primary School in Johannesburg, where I completed Grades 1 to 3. Then I moved to Likamoreng Primary School in Matatiele, Eastern Cape, where I completed Grade 4. Thereafter, I moved back to Gauteng to complete Grades 5 to 7 at the Cresslawn Primary School. I completed my Grade 12 at Focused High School, in Matatiele and the following year moved

on to pursue my Bachelors in Education degree at the

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. It

was at this stage in my life that things came into perspective. So, now I am a young woman who is well on her way to making her voice and those of other young women heard through sharing stories and experiences that will, I hope, enlighten society on the plight of young women in today's world.

I found her, she's been hiding here the whole time...

The little rascal has been hiding here the whole time. I could not believe that she was here. When did she get here? How did she get here? And for how long has she been here watching me, stalking me and seeing me cry? For years, I was on my own, always alone. I was an introvert for the most part of my life and knew only how to be a victim of my situation. I wore my worry on my face and every other part of me was filled only with disgust, confusion, and pain. My mind was afraid of me for the dark and painful thoughts that I would have. My heart was my enemy because every day it reminded me that my world was real. Messed up as it was, it was real and I would be trapped in it forever.

But that little rascal, she was there the whole time. She watched me give in to the darkness that surrounded me and she never said a word. She watched me turn into a rock that never dared to escape the life that it was living. She watched me refuse to feel what I felt because of the guilt that came with embracing my emotions. She saw me give up and doubt the point of it all: the school, the chores, the meals, even the waking up every day and pretending that everything was okay, that my family was fine and everything that was killing pieces of me every day was not actually happening. Back when all I wanted to do was crawl into my blankets and cry and die, she saw it, she was there for it all. Amidst all the confusion, pain, disgust, and hopelessness that was my life throughout my primary school and middle school and high school years, it never occurred to me that she was there, that someone like her would be so close to someone as broken as I was. But in 2013 on the streets of the Nelson Mandela Metro, I walked with her for the first time; this rascal, this woman, she looked so much like me except she was a lot lighter, bouncier, happier and had a smile that could light up the darkest of rooms. Yho! She was so beautiful. She was so kind, so driven, such a peaceful fighter—way more than I could say for myself.

She had joy written all over her face and with every step we took, every street we crossed, she left a trail of hope and excitement about life that was infectiously refreshing and new to me. She was like a stain on my heart, the kind that you would

leave on your shirt to show the world that you had had your favourite stew for dinner. Her positivity rubbed off on me and her presence reassured me that my life was not as grim and hopeless as I had lived it out to be. She showed me how to be soft, giving, hopeful, and forgiving. Every day that I spent with her she taught me how to forget about my pain and embrace my feelings and emotions in ways that would allow me to live my life regardless of the situation at home. She taught me how to embrace my anger and not let it consume me and it felt great. For the first in my life I was learning how to live my life without worry, pain, and anger. I was learning how to be happy, driven, outspoken, challenging, and a fighter.

I spent a large part of my tender years moving between provinces. This turned me into an introvert and I struggled to interact with other people and had very low esteem and confidence about myself. However, since coming to NMMU I have grown in confidence and interact more comfortably with other people and have even managed to build lasting friendships and relationships. This is partly because I joined several societies and initiatives on campus, including *Girls Leading Change*, where my opinions and perceptions on violence against women were challenged and, in many ways, my capabilities were groomed or improved. This helped me develop as a young woman growing up in a society where conformity is enforced and violence continues to be condoned by people who refuse to confront it or who are unequipped and unable to do so.

It may have taken a while but I finally learned how to claim back my life and childhood that had been stolen from me. I let go of the pain, hatred, and bitterness. I finally came into my own. After 18 years of living a life that was not my own I finally found her, the little rascal; she was hiding inside of me the whole time. This young woman was me.

In 'prison' for a crime that I did not commit

Growing up I always felt that I owed someone something, like I had to make and keep everyone else happy, please them and consider how they were feeling or what they were saying, and forget about myself and about keeping me happy because that would be too selfish and disrespectful a thing to do. My childhood was not *so bad*. I had my share of good times when I felt that I was a child for a minute even though that joy and freedom was short-lived and very quickly replaced with emotional and physical turmoil and all the thoughts and changes that came with that.

I grew up in a large family where everything, from the good times to the bad, was shared and experienced together. However, I always managed to feel alone, locked in by the intensity of my own emotions and unable to share how I felt with anyone else because they always seemed to move past all the problems in the family so much faster than I did and I felt that in sharing how I was feeling I would be burdening everyone else into revisiting emotions that they had long forgotten. Of course, that meant that regardless of what happened at home I just had to be *comfortable* with feeling and dealing with whatever I was feeling on my own. This seemed to work out fine for me for the most part during my primary and even middle school years. But, as I grew older, things began to come into perspective for me and I realised that I had not dealt with everything that broke me when I was younger and that it was all continuing to eat away at me.

I grew up in a home where domestic violence was the norm. As children in the household we knew that at any time of the day a fight was going to break out and that screams would fill the passages. I grew up knowing that we would be fine and even happy until my father walked into the house; then the atmosphere in the house would change, conversations would run dry and we, the children, would play outside always expecting the fighting to start. I cannot say exactly when it all started but the earliest memory that I have of it is of my father punching and kicking my mother in the corner of the bedroom that he, my mother, my little sister and I shared. My grandparents had travelled from Eastern Cape to try to mediate the trouble but were

instead also thrown into the very physical altercation that played out before my 6- or 7-year-old eyes. Still, I did not know how to let everyone know how I felt about that because I was too young and too afraid to interfere.

Needless to say, this was how it continued well into my teenage years. There were times when the domestic situation seemed to be getting better only to start up again and intensify. Things began to come into perspective for me when I was 14 or 15 years old completing my Grade 9 in my hometown, Matatiele; I realised how broken and confused I really was. It was during exam time and I had come out of school early and had made my way back home. The door was locked so I knocked on the door and my father answered and held the door slightly ajar and tried to block my view but I could still see that the room was turned on its head and my mother was crying. He, my father, would not let me in and instead handed me a R5 coin and told me to go buy him cigarettes at the local *spaza* (small shop) down the road. I remember running down the road angry, holding my tears back and trying to get to the shop as quickly as I could so that I could go back home and stop him from hurting my mother any more than he already had. I remember chanting “Please don’t let him kill her” all the way to and from the shop, hoping that God would hear me and stop what was going on.

When I got back, he took his cigarettes and held the door open for me to walk in and he walked out to smoke. I walked to my mother and found her trying to get up from the floor. She looked at me, gave me a brief smile and asked me to help her tidy up the house so that my little sister wouldn’t have to come back from school and see what had happened. While cleaning up and putting everything back in its place, I remember being furious at the man that I was meant to call my father for doing what he’d done to my mother, for what he had done to my family for so many years. I was angry at him for stealing my childhood from me, for preventing us from being a normal happy family. I remember especially hating him for the person that he was and the person that he was turning me into—a bitterly confused girl who could not fully live as a child is meant to live. I remember thinking how strong my

mother must be to be able to experience all the hurt and pain that was thrown at her and still be able to smile and love us the way that she did and still does.

It was at that point in my life, the darkest period of my life, that I realised that I was very angry, bitter, uncomfortably alone, sad, broken, emotionally deprived, and lost as a child and was all that because of one person who had a choice, but chose to spend his life terrorising, hurting, and pushing people who loved him away. It was at this point that I realised that I had been living a life that was not my own, that I had been trapped in a dark prison cell for a crime that I did not commit, that I was volunteering my happiness to my father to tear apart and keep from me and that I needed to break free. And break free I did. Now I live my life colourfully and have learned to be happy, happy for myself first and for those who wanted to see me happy. Now I live my life for me.

Sandisiwe Gaiza

I was born on 2 March 1995 in Motherwell hospital in Port Elizabeth. I started school at G.J. Louw Primary School in Korsten, Port Elizabeth. In 2008 I started high school at Ethembeni Enrichment Center, Port Elizabeth. This is a place where I experienced remarkable moments in my life, and where I moved from my comfort zone. I was a school prefect, representative leader, class captain, and a netball player. In 2012 I matriculated and then started university in 2013 at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and am now doing my 4th year of a Bachelor in Education degree. I got engaged in a group now called *Girls Leading Change* and I play netball for NMMU Veritas residence. Teaching has been my dream. My motto in life is “You are never too old to learn.”



Death can be a lesson

I remember clearly, that evening, rushing from school to get home. I was doing Grade 7. I got home and I found my mom on the bed crying so much that she could

barely speak. This was a shock to me, seeing her home earlier than me. Seeing the person who gave birth to me crying tore me to pieces, my whole body felt so heavy and sore. I asked her what was wrong but she couldn't speak nor explain a thing to me and continued crying. She eventually said, "Your dad passed away." My head spun. This felt like a fresh wound with salt on top. I wished I had never got home.

This is when I knew that things would change at home. He was the one who supported us financially. I thought the world was against me. I started questioning myself, asking if God loved me, how he could let such a thing happen to me, because I knew my mom could not afford to pay the school fees and feed me. The most painful thing is that I couldn't go to his funeral, because he was married to another woman who knew about me, but who kept quiet and didn't even tell me about his death. My mom heard from a friend about my dad's death. Now the pressure was on paying the high-school fees. I needed money more than anything. I knew I had to be responsible, make wise decisions, and aim at getting my grades high. This was the most difficult thing for me because I was a slow learner and, as a result, my mom wanted to send me to Westview which is a school for children who function poorly in academics. My Grade 7 teacher hesitated and advised against it.

At the end of the year a couple who own a company, and for whom my mom worked, offered to pay my high-school fees. This was some sort of a bursary so it had conditions like any other bursary. The woman was very strict and valued education. She used to tell me to aim for not less than 80 percent at school. At that time I did not understand her strategy until I got to Grade 12. Through the years I used to work so hard. I even got into Saturday classes to improve my performance. I improved and realized the harder I worked, the better things were for me. It was in 2012 that I was selected to be a school prefect, and also was given an award for being the top achiever. The woman came to me and said, "I knew you could do it, look at you, you have made it!" This has taught me to believe in myself and to never underestimate my ability. Who we become is based on our own decisions.

Watching my dreams becoming a reality

It feels like yesterday, but it was 2013 when I got accepted into Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. When I crossed the invisible line it felt like I had come to the wrong place. I never thought I would come to this place. It's a place where dreams are turned into reality. The goal was to get my degree and leave. Well I guess I was fooling myself. I joined a group of girls now called *Girls Leading Change*, where young women and girls address sexual violence and abuse. The girls in my group have taught me a lot about life and the concept of being a woman.

My mother raised me in a world of dreams. Well, I had dreams, too, which scared me every day. My dreams were of high expectations. I wanted to fly in an aeroplane, go to the United States, and explore the fun of sleeping in hotels. I thought I would only fulfil these dreams when I start working. My little sister would also say, "You live in your own world." It was in 2013 that I was invited to join the GLC at a workshop at Brookes Hill Hotel conference centre in Port Elizabeth. The excitement I had was written all over my face. In 2014, I went to Durban to present our work at a feminist gender forum. This was my first time out of Port Elizabeth. I was overwhelmed. I felt that NMMU was a place to turn dreams into reality and indeed it was. I am thankful and blessed but most importantly the journey has taught me much and I have learned many life lessons. I have gained experience, it opened my mind and made me see my career from another angle, not just teaching in the classroom, but beyond the classroom. My goals for 2016 are to start a group like the GLC in the school where I will be doing my teaching practice. I believe knowledge is gained through sharing. I want to empower young girls and boys and instill those values in our children. We want a better future and teaching is a profession which educates all others professionals.

Thina Kamnqa



I was born in 1991 on the 14th of August, at Mthatha General Hospital. I started my primary school in Buwa Junior Secondary School in Mthatha and I went to high school at Ithembelihle Comprehensive School in Port Elizabeth.

I completed my matric in 2012 and started university in 2013 at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. Now I am a 3rd year student doing a Bachelor of Education in Intermediate Phase, majoring in languages. I also participate in a group of girls addressing sexual violence in South African universities.

Learning to trust wisely

I learnt to trust wisely through the experiences that I went through. It was 2009 and I was 18 years old and doing Grade 10 at Ithembelelihle Comprehensive School in Port Elizabeth when I met my first boyfriend. He charmed me with his sense of humour and I fell for it. He would call me every day telling me how much he loved me. It felt awesome. He was working because he had dropped out of school when he was doing Grade 12. I loved him very much and I couldn't go a minute without thinking about him, but we never spent time together. We talked over the phone because I was staying with my sister. She was strict and I was not allowed to go out

and my boyfriend was not happy about that. He even said that I was fooling him and he was not sure if I really loved him because I did not make time for us. I loved him very much but I was scared of my sister because she would report me to my parents if I went out. One day when my sister was at work, I decided to visit him for an hour. We stayed chatting until it was very late. I told him that he must walk me home but he refused and said that I must first kiss him, claiming we had been together for a long time but had not made love, so it was a chance to do so since I was not allowed to go out. I refused to kiss him and told him I was not ready for that. I told him to wait until I was ready because I was really not ready for such a thing. He refused and locked the door, hiding the key. I cried and cried thinking that he would take pity and open the door, but he just leaned back on his bed watching me cry. I cried until I fell asleep and only woke up at ten, and he said I must go if I still wanted to go. He walked me home but when I knocked on my sister's door, she did not open for me. So I had to go back to my boyfriend's house. So we did it; he broke my virginity.

In the morning I went home and when I arrived there, my sister had packed all my clothes. I was welcomed by my luggage outside the door and she gave me money saying I must go back to Mthatha because I was not doing what I came for (which was studying), instead I was busy with men and sleeping out. So I had to apologize and promise not to sleep out again. I told my boyfriend and we decided to meet during the day and not in the evening and he promised that he would never force me again and he was sorry for what he had done.

Things were going fine at home and also with me and my boyfriend. Before I knew it it was June holidays and I went to Mthatha. When I returned in July I discovered that I was pregnant. I told my boyfriend about the pregnancy and he denied it saying that he was not the one who impregnated me, and that I was falsely accusing him. He said that I must find the father of my baby because I had been on recess, so who knew who I slept with while I was in Mthatha.

It was not easy for me as my friends were laughing and gossiping that I was a slut and that I did not even know the person who impregnated me, but they knew that I was only dating one person. They stopped visiting me and I heard rumours that they would not be friends with a slut as I would negatively influence them. When I greeted them in the street they did not greet back. So it was a very painful time for me because I didn't only lose my boyfriend but my friends, too. They betrayed me. So I raised my child alone with the help of my parents and I'm grateful to them for that. My son is five years old now and he is healthy and happy even though he has never met his father.

I wrote this with the aim of encouraging and advising young women to learn to trust wisely and to tell them that they must use condoms so that they do not get pregnant before finishing their schooling.

Persevere

In 2012 I passed my matric with high marks and I got an award of R25 000 from my high school to pay for my first year's university tuition fees. Then in 2013 I started a Bachelor of Education in Intermediate Phase, majoring in languages, at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. In my first year I struggled with my studies. Everything was difficult and, as a result I failed three modules. I was suffering financially because I did not have enough funding. I had applied for a National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) loan and did not even get a response. It was not easy because sometimes I would run out of bus fare and would be forced to stay home and not attend lectures. I struggled with printing quotas, and sometimes I would not write tests because I didn't have notes to study for it because of not having money to buy printing quotas to print notes. Suffering from poverty while studying is not easy, I even cancelled three modules just to get money because when you cancel a module you get half of your money back. Although it was not easy I never gave up on my studies.

In 2014 I had no money for registration, so my father had to borrow money from cash loans. He went to three different cash loans and luckily he got the money. I then registered for my second year, but still, NSFAS was not responding. I lost hope of ever getting any money from NSFAS. I continued with my 2nd year and failed two modules. I was so disappointed that I began asking myself questions such as, *Why me? Why do I fail? Am I not supposed to be educated?* I told myself I would not quit even though it was not easy because I know where I came from. I know how poor my family is and in order to get out of the poverty I have to be educated, so I need to study hard and not focus on my situation.

In 2015 I was going to do my 3rd year but I couldn't register because I owed NMMU money. The university policy is that a student cannot register if she/he still has outstanding debt from the previous year. My father asked a family member to take an Eduloan for me since Eduloan only wants people who are working. So each and every month my father's old age grant has to go towards repaying that debt and he is left with nothing.

But I am happy to say that for the first time, I passed all my modules in the June exams and I will strive to pass again in December. Fortunately I recently got a text message (SMS) from NSFAS that my application has been approved, so at least things will be a little bit easier and I will find no reason to fail a module.

All this has taught me that perseverance is worthy. Do not panic and do not give up. Your time will come. Who knew I would get an NSFAS loan after so many years. I might have dropped out of university because it was not easy to study with no financial help. But here I am. I chose to be patient and strong.

Wandiswa Momoza

I was born on 3 January 1996 in a small town called Matatiele. I started school at Makhoba Junior Secondary School in 2001 then moved to Zamokuhle Primary School in 2008. I went to Mvenyane High School in 2010, a school located between Cedarville and Matatiele and this is where I completed my matric in 2012. In 2013 I started at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and now I am doing the 4th year of my Bachelor of Education and I am looking forward to finding my purpose in life because I believe that I live for a purpose.



Bullying, the worst nightmare

The worst thing that ever happened in my life was when I turned into a victim of bullying. I do not remember how it started but it happened soon after my beloved grandfather, whom I loved so dearly, passed away in 2005. Every day in the morning when I had to go to school, I would feel so sad because there was a boy who was older than all of us in class who would hit me, tease me, and take my lunch box in

front of the class. The most humiliating part was that he was a relative but lived in another house. My classmates were also surprised by the way he treated me. I reported the issue to some of my teachers but nothing was done to change my situation. Apparently, this boy was using weed (dagga) and everyone was scared of him. He lived alone in his home because his parents were working very far from home. Therefore he did whatever he liked both at home and even at school. He had no respect for anybody. Hence he was able to bully us at school.

With my grandfather gone, and my mother working far from home, I lived with my grandmother. Because of the bullying I faced at school I had to move to another school far from home and went to live with my mother. After the bullying I faced in my first school, I was always scared of other kids because I could not stand up for myself. Bullying is a serious issue and parents have to take care of their children and protect them against bullying because they may end up lacking confidence for the rest of their lives.

My life at university

In 2013, the first time I went to Port Elizabeth, I was very excited about starting university and meeting new people. I got into a university residence where there was a house committee made up of a group of women. As part of our initiation into the university and the residence, these women made us wake up early in the morning and sing in front of their doors to wake them up. At night, we were only able to go to bed after midnight. These women treated us so badly and they would even punish us.

At that time, I felt like going home or changing to another university. I also hated the course I was doing because I had always wanted to become an Accountant one day. I loved accounting in high school but because of circumstances, I had to do education. As time went by I found myself loving the course because I was surrounded by people who loved and showed a passion for teaching. I thought it was God's purpose that I was doing teaching so I decided to love and carry on with

it. I started seeing another side of teaching; it is not just any profession, it is different and it has the power to change other people's lives. I found a family, the Christian Fellowship, a non-denominational organization where students gather for fellowship, to pray and serve God. I learnt a lot from this organization and I am grateful to God for everything about the fellowship because my life changed after I joined it. I also joined a group of young women, *Girls Leading Change*. These women are on a mission of fighting against gender-based violence (particularly against women). I felt so overwhelmed, excited and privileged to be part of this project with these women in challenging this issue of violence. They are intelligent, wonderful and powerful as women, and I believe this issue of violence will change through us.

Zethu Jiyana



I was born in 1990 at St Patrick's hospital in Bizana. I started primary school at Bizana Village Junior Secondary School and continued my schooling at Bizana Village Senior Secondary School, but then moved to Port Elizabeth where I did Grade 11, and I completed Grade 12 at a school called Rocklands Intermediate School in 2007.

The following year, 2008, I registered at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University for Industrial Engineering. After a difficult first year at university I took a few years off to work and then came back to pursue a career in Education, and registered for a Bachelor of Education, Further Education and Training. I am doing my 4th year and am doing practice teaching at a township high school in Port Elizabeth. I am involved in a number of projects including *Girls Leading Change* where I am a leader of young activists who fight against gender-based violence and especially sexual violence. I belong to *Divine Achievers*, a group of Bizana young people who promote education in the rural areas, and I am the secretary and a member of the *Humanising Pedagogy* forum, a project aimed at making people aware of their rights to fairness and justice.

My life lesson

I would love to say “If I could go back I would change so many things,” but I have learnt so much from what I have experienced. This is my life lesson.

After passing Grade 12 and starting university I decided it was time I started dating. Even though I was keen on that decision, I was also very nervous about the whole process of dating because for one, I come from a Christian family and dating was not allowed; two, I had never kissed a guy before; and three, I was nervous about the expectations that would come with being in a relationship. I was now in an environment where relationships without sex did not exist and where none of my friends were virgins. Was I ready for sex? No, but did I want to have a boyfriend? Yes.

With hopes that my boyfriend would not pressure me into having sex, I went into my first relationship. For some time I did not let my boyfriend get close enough to visit me and sleep over, not until the day my sister and her boyfriend mocked me and asked why my *so-called* boyfriend never visited. That is when I decided to let him come over to my flat and even spend the night. As expected, he started asking for us to have sex and I kept saying no! Four months into the relationship he came to me and told me he was going away on a job and that he would be back in six months. I was sad about it and he used that moment to ask for us to have sex. In fact he said he wanted something to remember me by and sex was the best memory he could keep of me. Still I said, “No, I’m not ready.” That is when he started being rude about it. He told me I was too old to still be a virgin and that nobody wants them. I denied my principles that night; I put my feelings aside to please a man. I felt horrible about it the next day. I had disappointed all the young people who looked up to me. I could no longer be their role model nor speak to them about the morals of a young Christian because I had defied them. Worst of all is that he had lied to me about the job because he came back for more the next day.

I decided to go back to St Albans where my family lived and to travel to university from there, just to be away from him. While I was home I started being close to another male friend from high school and ended my relationship with the first boyfriend and started a new relationship with this friend. I thought he would be patient with me because he knew me well and he knew my principles. Well, I was proved wrong when he also wanted to have sex and even told me that he knew I was no longer a virgin and that my first boyfriend was bragging about breaking my virginity. I started being sexually active with him also for the wrong reason, because I felt I owed it to him to have sex with him as I did with the previous boyfriend. I was losing myself, my morals, and my principles in the process. After some time I fell pregnant and I wasn't even disappointed about it because my sister was seven months pregnant at the time and she would speak to me and treat me like a child. I felt she couldn't do it anymore because now we were both pregnant and at the same level in university. Through all this I never thought how this was hurting my parents. I was just serving my insecurities and delaying my future in the process while my boyfriend had gone to university. He was living my dream and I had to pay for our actions.

Events that followed gave me time to reflect on my life and out of this I learnt to be satisfied with myself and compete with no one. I learnt to love and respect myself and to stand my ground and honour my principles. I apologised to my parents and to my pastor. I was ready to change, to be a better person, to lead by example and, most importantly, to make me proud of me. This is my life lesson.

A rainbow appeared

2008. My future was looking bright for I was doing an engineering course. It felt so good being a woman in the engineering field but then I destroyed my career in engineering because of the decisions I had made. I remember during the final exams how sleepy I was. Every time I opened a textbook, it took me straight to dreamland. I was pregnant. I did so badly. I had been sick and nauseous and so my parents took

me to the doctor. I lied to the first doctor about my last period but the second one could tell I was pregnant even before the pregnancy test. When the results came back my mother wept so much that I couldn't hold my tears either. It hit me that I had disappointed my parents. I looked at my mother and my heart was in pain because the queen of my heart was crying because of me; I hurt her.

When we got home my parents were upset. When I tried to run my sister locked the door and said, "How long will you run? Just get it over and done with." I am grateful that she did what she did, but at that time all I could think of was why was I getting a beating for falling pregnant when my sister was nearing the end of her pregnancy and she had never been beaten for falling pregnant. She was supported and given clothing to keep warm during the pregnancy. It was this obsession that I had with my sister talking, not me.

The next year my parents only registered my sister at university and I was home and very sick from the pregnancy. I had to look after my sister's baby, and my nephew would cry all day! That period at home gave me a chance to reflect on my life and think about how I could make things better. I had to be strong for me and my baby and I decided that I will be the best mother to this baby but also a mother to many. After the challenges and pain a rainbow appeared in the sky and today I am a teacher and my learners call me "mom" and I am nurturing them and helping them to make better decisions. I am a mother, a mother of a nation, because finally a rainbow appeared and I grew.

Zikhona Samantha Tshiwula

I was born on 1 March 1994 in Port Elizabeth. This means I am a 'born free', born after the end of apartheid. I started school in 2001 at Walmer Primary School, which is situated in Walmer township in Port Elizabeth. In 2008 I moved to Cape Town and did Grade 8 at Vredenburg High School. The following year I moved to Simon's Town and did Grade 9 at Simon's Town High School. In 2010 I moved back to Port Elizabeth where I did Grades 10 to 12. In 2013 I went to the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University where I enrolled for a Bachelor of Education. I am now doing my 4th year. I have learners from Walmer Primary School who sometimes come to me for help. I help them with their homework. I love working with kids because they look up to me as their role model. I also joined a group of girls from rural areas -- *Girls Leading Change*. They have helped me in so many ways that I can now stand up for myself, I can speak out against the violation of women. I also want to encourage other young women to speak up so that their voices can be heard.



I was raised by my grandmother

I was raised by my grandmother. My mother left me when I was very young and went to live in Johannesburg. I do not know who my father is. My mother came back in 1999 when I was four years old. She was very sick at that time. She had AIDS. She died and my grandmother had to look after me. In 2001 I started primary school and it was very painful when I saw the other kids waiting for the school gates to open bringing in their parents, while I was waiting alone. It was not that my grandmother did not want to come to the school but it was that she had gone to work.

I remember the house that we stayed in, the good aroma of fried onion and liver that my grandmother used to make for supper. My home was small but then I had space to do anything that I wanted to although I was lonely and had no one to play with, no brothers or sisters. My grandmother loved inviting her friends into our home. She would invite them and they would drink and sing the whole night. To me it was fun because I had someone whom I could play with, because one of my grandmother's friends had a child who was the same age as me, so we would play and sing along with them. My grandmother would sometimes return late and so I would wait at the neighbour's house. I loved waiting there because they had a television which we did not have at home. My grandmother would sometimes come back drunk or not even come back at all and I would wait for her the whole night and not sleep.

I had to do homework on my own with no help from anyone, but I would manage as I loved doing my school work even though it was hard. I even stole books from cousins just because I loved reading. I was so used to doing things on my own that I even tried to wash my own school uniform, but I added bleach and it had white spots all over it. My grandmother gave me a hiding for that. Life was hard at home and there was no money even though I was getting a foster care grant. My grandmother would use it to buy alcohol for her friends. I had no shoes or clothes to wear; I would get old clothes from my relatives. Even my school uniform was too big for me.

I did well at school and in Grade 1 I got a certificate for being a hard worker, and for reading. When I was in Grade 5 things got worse as my grandmother got addicted to alcohol. She would sometimes not go to work but drink the whole day. She would lock me in the house and go to her friend's place. One day after school I saw my classmates laughing. As I came closer I saw my grandmother sitting on the pavement and singing and even calling my name. I was so embarrassed that I did not know what to do but I told myself that we don't choose our families, neither can we tell the person what to do. No matter what, she was my grandmother and I would help her get up.

I sometimes wondered if things would've been different had my mother been alive? I would have had everything I needed, but then I told myself that I had to accept who I was and what my grandmother was, even though she was an alcoholic. When she was sober we would have a decent conversation about my future and things that I needed. I am here now. I am healthy, strong, brave and educated. I choose not to give up. I am the woman I am today because of my grandmother.

Getting into university

In 2012 I had a baby while I was doing Grade 12. The teachers and my family told me to drop out and do Grade 12 the following year, but I disagreed with that because I wanted to go to university the following year. I decided to stay in school even though it was hard, because I had a responsibility at home and had to look after my baby and study for my exams. That did not stop me or make me give up. I worked very hard every day and I would do very well at school and my baby was healthy.

I struggled a lot because I had no one to look after my child while I was at school, so she started crèche when she was one month old. This continued until I had to go to university. I was looking forward to going to university but at the same time was worried that I had no bursary to pay for my studies.

In my first year at university my aunt paid for my registration fees and I also applied for NSFAS (student loan scheme), but I did not get it because they had no funds. So my aunt was supporting me by giving me bus fare but there were days that she did not give me any money and I had to walk from Walmer to Summerstrand where the university is located. I had no lunch and it hurt to see my friends and other students buying food.

This continued in second year and I was so upset that it affected my studies, but God answered my prayers and I got an NSFAS loan. I was very happy and even convinced my grandmother to allow me to move to an off-campus residence. Since she promised that she would change, I left her with my 2-year-old child. But my grandmother did not do as she had promised. I used to get calls from my neighbours telling me that my child was alone at home and so I had to leave the residence and move back home.

I came home and things became worse as the father of my child started to abuse me both physically and emotionally. He would abuse me in front of my friends just because he was jealous that I had friends. This was because in high school, I used to have no friends because I had to focus both on studies and on him. I remember the date. It was the 28th of October that I invited my friends for a sleepover at my house and we went out and I showed them my township. My boyfriend was so jealous when he saw me walking with my friends that he came and abused me in front of them. I was embarrassed and thought that what he did was not right! But then I told myself that if he did it again I would report him. He apologized and he has not laid a hand on me ever since then. As a woman I should not allow a man, in fact anyone, to tell me what to do because this is my life and future that I am building. No one should rob me of that.

Asisipho Mntonga



I come from a small village called Tabankulu in Eastern Cape. I was born in 1994 on the 27th of April (the date of the first democratic elections after the end of apartheid in South Africa). When I was seven, my four siblings and I lost our father, and our mother was left to raise us on her own. I started my primary schooling in 2000 at Ntabankulu Junior Secondary School. Even though it was not easy because of our family situation, I managed to succeed and passed my Grade 9 in 2009. I started my high school, Grade 10, at Ntabankulu Senior Secondary School in 2010. During my high school years, I experienced moments of sadness, pain, joy, and victory, and today I can freely say that my school days were the best. I completed Grade 12 in 2012 with excitement and joy because of my good results. For me, passing Grade 12 meant unlocking the doors of opportunity to explore life to the fullest. I applied to university and was accepted. I am now doing my 4th year of a Bachelors in Education degree at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. I am a member of the *Girls Leading Change* project; which focuses on addressing sexual violence on our campus.

My early life experiences and my nickname, Qaqamba

The early years of my life were not easy. However, all the struggles I faced in life made me stronger, bolder, and more courageous. My school experiences were a major contributing factor towards who I am today, and they gave me a great story to tell.

As a child I grew up being told by my mother that from birth I never smiled. This kept me wondering: Why did I never smile as a child? I asked myself why my mother chose to tell me about that sad part of me. There could have been so many things she could have told me, so why that? Maybe I was not as beautiful as she was expecting me to be? In fact, my mother used to say that I was ugly, and that I had a big mouth. I grew up believing that I was uglier than my siblings and that I was not as good as everyone else. I have learnt that words spoken by those you love are the ones that hurt the most. At home I was the fourth child, and the one who was darkest in complexion. So being told by my own mother all those negative things about me did not do me any good. Instead, it poisoned me to hate myself. At home I was teased by my siblings who would make fun of me in terms how I looked, spoke, and dressed. I grew up to be a quiet child and was always afraid of what they might say, and of all the jokes they made about me.

As I grew older I tried to be strong, and to hide my emotions by playing doll house, or singing and just pretending that everything was okay, hiding the pain inside my heart. Everybody was too busy to care. Time went by and I grew older and it was time for me to enter primary school. Because of our family's financial situation, (my parents did not earn enough money to provide for all of us), I went to school without a uniform. I only had a *church dress* that was too floral for school, and in my lunchbox was black coffee with no sugar, and stiff dried porridge, which is called *umphokoqo* in isiXhosa and *pap* in Afrikaans. At school learners and teachers would make fun of me asking when I would buy a uniform and get a new lunchbox. I had to carry a lunchbox because school was so far away from home. I hated school and

I could not see any point in going to school because other learners had a full uniform and nice lunchboxes, and I did not.

My mother and grandmother motivated me to go school and they encouraged me. My mother used to say to me, in isiXhosa, “*Imfundo isusua intluphekeko keuvè*” (Education will remove your poverty.) She meant well by these words; education would help me reach my goals, uplift my standard of living and enable me to have a better life, and escape from a situation of poverty. At home we were suffering and our situation got worse when our father died before I even reached high school. My mother tried all she could to provide for all of us hoping we would reach high school level.

I started high school in 2010. In high school I was again teased and bullied. Learners gossiped about me behind my back, saying that I had smelly breath. They would come with their nose pegged to protect themselves from my smelly breath. I remember those dark days of my life. Because the school was a public school and poorly resourced we had to share textbooks and I had no one to share the textbook with because nobody wanted to share with me. During class I had to take notes and listen carefully to what the teacher said. I worked hard. Sometimes I thought of quitting school, but I remembered my mother’s words which kept ringing in my head. Reporting this to my mother was not an option for me as she was always negative when it came to me. I never felt happy around her because she always compared me to my older sisters. I had to be better or perfect just like my sisters seemed to be; she always reminded me how clever they were. Every day I would go to school with a broken heart and carry my scrapbook filled with notes.

In October 2010, as we were approaching the year-end exams, there was a prize-giving day in our school for all students who had performed well academically and who had managed to get 90% or above. In the Grade 10 class I had become the top achiever and I was awarded an overall achievement award. It was the first time in my life that I felt good about myself and the first time that my mother congratulated me.

I thought of her words of motivation while I was still at primary school. The prize-giving day was an epic moment for me which I will never forget and it boosted my confidence. After that prize-giving day I thought of the struggles I had had and the nick name, *Qaqamba*, that I became known by. I did not know what it meant until the day of the achievement award. The award was a turning point in my life. After the event, I got a chance to speak to my mother who was in a good mood towards me. She told me that *Qaqamba* means Shine Bright, and that it was given to me by my late father because I did not behave like the other children. As a small child, I was never afraid of the snakes, dogs, and wild cats in my village! For my mother, the nick name *Qaqamba* meant that a lot of good things were still to come in our lives, and would change our lives forever.

My nick name has inspired me and motivated me to go on with life. I now realise that the name my late father gave me actually signifies who I am and the greatness inside me. I realised how powerful my name was. The painful experiences I had as a child made me value and appreciate the smallest things I had. My early life experiences showed me how important the role is that a mother plays in a child's life and this kept me wondering how my life could have been if my mother had supported and accepted me from my early childhood. Through my early life experiences I have learnt that my attitude and the choices I make will determine where I go and how I will get there.

Faith and hope in me

There is stirring in my heart ... I have heard people say that there are matters of the heart, but I was never really sure what they meant. I finally discovered that it means that matters of the heart are my inner feelings, my world, and my own solitude. In this life I have learnt the lesson that love is the opposite of fear. The more you love yourself the less you fear anything.

In 2014 during my second year at NMMU, I failed a module called Human Movement Sciences. This is a compulsory module for education students. I felt disappointed when the results came as it was the first time that I experienced what it feels like to fail a module. I felt angry with myself, hating myself even more because I knew I had not only disappointed myself but also my mother and my family. I asked myself what is it that I do not have that other students in university seem to have? I had to repeat the semester module and during that time I broke my ankle very badly while playing soccer. I called for help but none of the other players took any notice of me. After much shouting for help people still did not help and all they did was laugh at me. I cried because it was so painful and I was not able to move my leg. I cried because of the pain and because of the response of the people and I declared in my heart that people do not care about me. Fortunately there was a boy who noticed that I was in pain and he called the instructors who laughed at me. An ambulance was called and I was taken to hospital where they put a cast on my leg and ankle and gave me crutches to walk with.

Because it was not easy to walk with the crutches I was given a wheelchair to move around the university. My heart was filled with sorrow and anger and I asked God every day, “Why me of all people?” While my broken ankle caused me much discomfort my friends helped me with laundry, dishes, and cleaning my room. They did all they could in helping me through my healing process. Some friends were less helpful and would tell me that I am too heavy to be pushed in the wheelchair. I pretended that I was not hurt by their words. I had no one to talk to, everyone was busy. I hated God, I hated myself more than anything and I was angry at myself and blamed myself for everything.

At that time I knew the word rejection, but never understood it fully until I once again experienced it. I have been rejected by people I call family, and by friends, and I was even made fun of by a lecturer. When it rained my friends made up excuses not to come and fetch me. My roommate would encourage me to study even more and would tell me that crying does not solve anything: “*Akumcedi ukukhala dana.*”

Even though I wanted to give up and go back home, my mother's words, "Education will remove the poverty in you," kept me at university.

Healing is the process we have to go through and we have to endure the pain in order to be completely healed on the outside and also on the inside. I have learnt that healing begins within you. It begins in the heart before it is confirmed by the doctor.

Bongiwe Mhambi



I was born on 11 October 1989 at the SS Gida hospital in Keiskammahok, Eastern Cape. I lived with my granny in her house. I went to Masonwabe Junior Primary School, then later went to Ekukhanyeni Higher Primary School. In 2002 I started high school at St Matthew's High School and passed my Grade 12 in 2006. In 2009 I went to study Information Technology at CTI Education Group. In 2013 I started a Bachelor of Education (Intermediate Phase) at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. I am still working on my dream of becoming a teacher. I am also involved in a project in which young women at South African universities oppose violence against women and the abuse of women. I made a vow this year that I will attend church more often because God has done great things for me. I am hoping and praying that I will not go back on my word.

Memories of a troubled child

I remember that day like it was yesterday—the day that changed my life. At first I thought it was for the worst, but as it turned out, it was for the best. It was in 2009 that I went to study Information Systems (engineering) at CTI Education Group in East London. As much as other students complained about how hard the course was, I never encountered any difficulties. I passed my modules with flying colours. I had really hoped that I would finish my course in the allocated time. However, CTI was a very expensive college where each student had to pay R6500 a month. My life changed for the worst when my dad passed away. There was no one who could afford to pay my fees.

It was on a Monday morning when I received the phone call. I will never forget that day. I was sitting in the dining room having breakfast when my phone rang. I was so excited to hear my mother's voice, but immediately heard the sadness in it. She knew how much I loved my father, regardless of the fact that he had abused us. I remember her first words, "I am so sorry my baby." I knew right there and then that something bad had happened. She broke the news, "Your father has left us, he is no more." She insisted that I take a taxi home. And then it sunk in. I was not dreaming. My dad was really gone. Two weeks after my dad's funeral, I had to go back to CTI in East London. My mom was an assistant nurse, and all she could afford to give me was a tray of chicken and brown bread, food for the whole week. One day during class, the instructor came to collect my computer. I was confused so I went to his office and asked him why he took my computer. He told me that my fees had not been paid up and that I had to leave and come back only when my fees had been settled. I was embarrassed and hurt, so I called my mom who then told me to pack my stuff and come home because there was no one who could afford to pay my fees. It was a very sad time for me. But looking back, I now see it as a blessing in disguise because if I had not left CTI that year, my mom would've drowned in debt and I would not have studied at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). This also means

I would not have become an activist against women abuse. As much as I was hurt then, I am very happy now.

Loving her till time stands still

The bad choices I have made in my life have turned out to be the biggest lessons of my life. As hard as it was at home after my father's death, I decided to go back to studying. I chose to study for a Bachelor of Education degree at NMMU in Port Elizabeth. Being a rural girl and coming to a big city like Port Elizabeth has enabled me to experience new things. In the city, I have also been faced with lots of challenges and have had to make big choices. Unfortunately, I made some bad choices. When I came to Port Elizabeth, I rented a flat for about two months. I met a guy whom I dated for about three months and then he asked me to move in with him. Of course he was working, so I decided to move in with him. I thought I was in love with him, but I was actually in love with the idea of his being my support system, financially. Reality kicked in when he proposed. I knew right there and then that I didn't love him at all. Yes, I moved in with him. Yes, he was supportive, and yes, I cared for him but did I love him enough to spend the rest of my life with him?

I didn't think so. As I was still deep in thought, trying to figure out what I should do, I was interrupted by a sudden urge to go to the toilet. I felt dizzy and nauseous. "It must be something I ate," I thought. This went on for days, and so he took me to the doctor, who then confirmed that I was seven weeks pregnant. As happy as he was, I felt that my world was turned upside down. As months went by I just couldn't stand the sight of him, so I decided to move out. He was not happy and even threatened not to care for the baby but I moved out anyway. What occurred after that was not pleasant. Life became very tough for me because I used to depend on him. During the 8th month of my pregnancy, I decided that I couldn't take it anymore. If I was struggling to take care of myself, how was I going to be able to take care of a new-born baby? I made a decision to give my baby up for adoption because abortion was never an option. I remember that it was on the 3rd of July 2014

when I gave birth to my beautiful baby girl. I was going to give her away. I refused to go and see her in the nursery because I was afraid that I would develop a bond with her and that would cause me to change my mind. When the social worker came for me to sign the forms, I asked if I could just see the baby one time and she agreed. So I went to the nursery and there she was, the most beautiful baby ever. It was at that moment that I told myself that the child was mine, I didn't carry her for 9 months just to give her away. It didn't matter whether I would have to feed her grass and stones, what mattered was that I was going to give her all the love that she deserved, the best gift any mother could ever give her child. I cancelled the adoption and took my baby home. I am now working on my dream, and hoping that my mistake will be a lesson to her, and many other women.

Happy Mthethwa

I was born in 1992 in a small town in Mpumalanga, called Piet Retief.

I started primary school in 1999 at Piet Retief Primary School. I started high school in 2006 at Piet Retief High School and completed Grade 12 in 2011 at Vryheid Comprehensive Secondary School.

In 2013 I started studying at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape and now I am a 4th year Bachelor of Education student. I am looking forward to transforming what I see to be our failing education system in South Africa.



I am grateful for the pain I went through in my life

In 2002 my mother moved me into a new school because of my being a regular in the detention room being punished for the many violations I committed. But in Grade 12 in 2011, I worked hard so that I could achieve and make my grandparents proud of me since they were the ones who raised me. In everything I did I just thought of them. This was one of the reasons I pushed so hard at my academics at school. In June of the same year I was invited to the school prize-giving and my

grandparents were there. What made me happy was seeing a smile from my grandmother that made me feel so special. In late September of the same year, she started getting ill and I got so worried that I lost focus on my school work. In December she was admitted to hospital and on Christmas day she passed away. I was really sad because throughout my whole life I had made so many sacrifices and worked so hard so that one day when I became successful she could be proud of herself for raising me into the person I had become. She was buried on my birthday, 31st December and the following week the Grade 12 results were going to be published. I wished that she was still alive to share that joyful moment with me. I know she would have been proud of me.

Dear Gogo

I am grateful for your raising me and I am thankful for the time I could spend with you. In my heart you will forever live.

Love Happy

Today I am a strong woman because of the lessons she taught me. Some things that happen to us are either meant to build us or teach us a lesson. From the loss of my beloved grandmother I have grown and become powerful and ready to take on whatever challenges life has for me.

God's time is the best

My first year at university, 2013, was a crisis. Times were tough. For most days I ate boiled eggs and *pap* (a sort of bread made with maize meal or corn flour). The best meal, maybe once a month, would be macaroni and fish. I resided in a non-cooking residence, and so I would wake up at 02:00, boil eggs and cook *pap* (on a two-plate stove which I hid) to last the whole week. All my flat mates had bursaries and scholarships and I was the only one studying education who did not have one. I would hear them talking in the corridor, "It is four o' clock! Let us go and buy supper," and some would respond "*Yho hayi bethunana ndidikawe mma zirusians ngoku ndizakutya yoghurt and buy some chocolates qba namblanje*" (No people! I am tired of Russians (sausages), I will eat yoghurt and buy some chocolates today). Having to

hear that every day during these times tore me apart. Every day at four o' clock, I would sleep or go and study. The smell of the café food filled my nostrils! I even changed the path of going to school just to avoid the smell and seeing other students carrying nice take-aways. At the end of examinations we would pack our belongings, sign them in and place them in the storeroom. There was one girl in our flat who would always throw food away and one evening she threw away a pack of small cartons of yoghurt. At night, when everyone was asleep, I went to the bathroom bin, took the yoghurt out and ate it the following day. It was so tasty!

My mother never knew about this and I would never ask her for more money, not because she would not give it to me, but because I knew the responsibilities she had back at home, including taking care of my baby. She is the only educated one at home so all my relatives look up to her. As a result, I decided to work hard at my studies, not because I wanted to, but because for me it was a way of overcoming the pain and struggle I was facing. Every time I went home for the holidays, I would tell myself that I would not be returning to the university the following year if this was the life I had to live. The following year, 2014, was my year! In January I received two phone calls from the Department of Education wanting to sponsor my studies and I had to choose one. Late in March of the same year I got an email about another bursary and again I had to choose. At the end of my second year I received a letter from the university stating that I received a merit award for outstanding results! I think back to my first year and remember that I dropped from size 32 to 30 because of always being hungry and eating only one meal per day. But look at me now, I am wearing a size 36 and I am grateful for that because I always wanted to gain weight. I am now enjoying university and living a normal life like other students.

In life when things like these happen, do not lose hope, and never give up! Your time to shine will come and when it does what happened before will be like a bad dream. Today I fear no struggle and no suffering. I am strong, nurtured, and a powerful young woman because of the pain I went through.

Lelethu Mlobeli



I was born in Matatiele in 1994. I started primary school at Maluti Junior Secondary School in Matatiele, and high school at Shayamoya High in Kokstad. I then went to Mvenyane Senior Secondary School and completed my Grade 12 in 2012.

I started at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth in 2013. I am now a 4th year Bachelor of Education student and am part of *Girls Leading Change*, a girl-led project against sexual violence.

I was found by my Everything

I was born into a family of four and raised in a family of 10. My parents both died when I was very young, around five or six years of age. They left two beautiful daughters behind. We were taken in by our father's brother into a family of 8, and with us, this made 10. I never felt free at home with the new family. I was 2 in 1 — I seemed to grow up with two characters. I was shy and very reserved at home and I was bubbly and popular at school. Whichever school I went to I was well-liked. In

my lower grades I was very clever, so much so that I taught the class. Teachers loved me and so did learners. I was also known for my talent in singing.

In high school I was well-known for my intelligence. I also became Ms Freshette in Grade 8, and Ms Shayamoya High in Grade 9. I was even interviewed by a newspaper journalist over a cellphone and was written about in the newspaper. This boosted my confidence as a human being. This all happened when I was in school.

At home I was a quiet, reserved and very shy person. I always hid my feelings. I had times when I felt like crying to someone but couldn't find anyone, even amongst my sisters and brothers at home. Friends brought happiness to my life, or should I say joy? I don't know. But I found them as my small family, people I could laugh and play with, although I never told them everything about my life. So I would find myself a secret place to cry and cry until I felt better because I had no one to pour out my heart to. Crying made me feel better. I think the reason why I cried was because I needed love, although I didn't know it. I was still young. The family provided for some of our needs. My sister felt unequal to another sister who was her age, so she left my uncle's home to go somewhere, but no one in the family knew where. As time went on, I would hear rumours that she was seen at a carwash with other girls (her friends), and men. That broke my heart but I bottled it up within myself and no one saw how I was hurting inside.

I would feel some sort of healing at school because I felt love and freedom there. I expressed my feelings at school and did well in my school work. Winning and becoming a beauty queen (1st place) made me feel beautiful and of worth although I was called names at home. These small things were big to me as they gave me courage to press on with life and know that there is much better to life than this. My father and mother (who are really my aunt and uncle) would argue, and my father would blame me for the argument. This went on to a point where I thought of committing suicide, thinking they'd be able to live in peace without me. I was wrong. I came to university and found my Everything. Actually, I was found by my Everything - God.

Life began

I started building a relationship with my mother. The walls started breaking down between me and my family. We started talking to each other, having very long talks, building up a good relationship amongst all of us. What did not give me rest was the relationship I had with my mother. It was not healthy because we did not communicate the way a daughter and mother should. I was afraid of her.

But my “Everything” became an answer to this as it was my heart’s cry that I establish and have a good ‘mother and daughter’ relation with my mother. God gave me the courage to get out of my comfort zone and do it. I started sending her messages of courage and hope because she too, was facing her own challenges. She would also call and we would chat.

When I went home for holidays, it would not be like it was when I was in high school. Because I knew what I wanted, a good and healthy relationship with my mother, I got out of the place of comfort and started talking to her and starting conversations. I also saw her doing the same. This made me feel happy because I could talk about my mother as my friends talked about their mothers, how close they are and how they cannot survive without them.

Life began. I now stay up with my mother until midnight, chatting, watching TV, sitting around the heater until we get sleepy. My life also began because I am not wandering around anymore as I know where I am going. I am now living a life driven by purpose, which comes from the Lord, my Everything.

Elethu Ntsethe



I was born on the 19 September 1995 at St Patrick's Hospital in Bizana, Eastern Cape. I started school in 2001 at Qadu Junior Secondary School in Bizana. I then changed to Meje Junior Secondary School in 2007 which is also in Bizana.

In 2010 I started high school at Bizana Senior Secondary School and matriculated in 2012. In 2013 I started university at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan

University in Port Elizabeth, Eastern

Cape. Now I am a woman, a nurturer and

the core of all human life. I am a woman. I might be weak on the outside but strong on the inside. I am strong, capable enough, and special. I smile to give hope to all woman. I am a woman on the move, moving towards transformation.

I live to tell her story

"I almost aborted her not knowing she would be this hard-working," my mother said, as I passed by, talking to her aunt. My heart sank and I was very embarrassed and angry at the same time. It was July 2009 and there was a funeral at home and all the family members were gathered in the rondavel. I ran out crying and sat outside. I was thinking of how she hated me when I heard footsteps behind me. I felt her

shadow over my body. “It is true my child, I wanted to abort you so badly because of the circumstances then, but I did not have the guts to do it either,” she said. I felt the bitterness in her voice but did not reply. Her presence was too much to handle, so much so that I ran out of the yard to my private tree. That tree was my secret place to be close to nature and to have a conversation with myself.

I found a way to think back to when I was still in her womb. I was feeling so warm and secure when I suddenly felt pain. She was telling him that she was pregnant but it did not go too well. The day was filled with sadness. It was unlike when she told him about my two elder siblings. She thought it was going to be the same happiness but it turned to bitterness. That day she could not sleep thinking of how to get rid of the baby. She even planned to tell him that she missed her date and thought she was pregnant. She was afraid of raising a child alone. She was afraid of what the world would say. I cried, cried, and cried out loud in her womb begging her not to abort me. She refused. I begged day and night promising her to be a good girl. She could not listen to me thinking what the world would say, forgetting that I was the outcome of their actions. I pleaded with her to keep me and she listened. She decided to keep me. Her stomach grew bigger than before. Everyone criticized her as she had expected. She thought things would change when she gave birth to me but they did not. She was all alone. She cried day and night thinking she would not be in that state if she had not listened to me. Again she told herself that it was nothing compared to the smile I wore the day I arrived.

I heard someone calling me from a distance, disturbing me in my thoughts. It was Mama. I took a deep sigh, wiped my tears and stood up. I smiled and went back to her. I remembered the stories she told me about my growing up. She told me that she milked her father’s goats and cows to feed me when I was still a baby. Custard made with cow’s milk was my formula. That was the only thing she could afford at that time. At times, when she got more money out of her part time jobs or piece jobs as she called them, she would buy lots of baby formula so it would last at least two months. “You were such a good girl. I remember how you would cover yourself with

a blanket just to hide your yellow feeding bottle because everyone teased you. I am so proud of you my girl,” she said with tears in her eyes as I met her on my way back home. Seeing Mama made me realise that I was wrong. At least she kept me and now I am a big girl. Her difficulties and suffering because of me made me choose to be different. I owe her a lifelong debt and I can never repay her. Keeping her proud is the best I can do to keep her smile. Mama, I love you.

My journey to womanhood

Woman, you are enough. Woman, you are capable. Woman, you are special.

The challenges that came my way in the year 2013 were unbearable. I lost my aunt a few days after the university opened. She was not only my aunt but my sister, my friend, and my second mother. At her burial, my uncle died. I felt a dark cloud covering all the light in my life. My world turned upside down. My uncle, my sports coach, was gone—gone and never returning. But why? “Why should this happen to me?” I asked myself. I remember how he used to encourage me when I was going to represent the school. “Go out there, my niece, and shine. Carry the flag of our family so high in the sky and get yourself many gold medals like I have,” he would say. I would laugh and tease him, saying, “Surely, I will have more,” because, unlike him, I started this journey at a young age. We would laugh out loud. His words were my strength to win. Losing him made me want to quit. I felt like dying, too. I knew that home would never be the same again.

I knew things had changed and that meant only one thing; I had to work hard and fulfil their wishes. In the process I gained a brother from my father’s side. We started building a relationship that was never there. He went above and beyond to make me independent. He brought back light to my life. He gave me brotherly love. He did all he could so I could prosper one day. He was my motivator. I grew closer and closer to him because I wanted that father figure, the figure that existed in person but whom I never loved. I knew growing closer to him would draw attention from our father, attention that he never gave to me. I worked so hard to obtain good

grades, the grades that made me win my place. Finally, I won that fatherly love, the love and protection that every young woman needs.

My father came into my life a changed man. He now cared, loved, and protected. I gained that love, the love I had been seeking all my life, the love I always wanted. This was all because of the grades I got in my first year at university. They brought him hope and made him believe in me. I still managed to conquer the challenges I faced in his absence because I am a woman. I made him proud. And for the very first time he said he was proud of me. Woman, the things you go through are nothing, nothing compared to your capabilities, strength, and wisdom because you are a woman. Yes, I am weak on the outside but I am strong on the inside. The smile a woman wears equals the pain and sufferings she has gone through.

Once again, woman, you are special. Woman, you are capable.

Philiswa Melissa Lufele

I was born on 28 April 1994, at Helene Joseph hospital in Johannesburg. I started primary school in 2001 at Mzingisi Primary school in Humansdorp, a small town near Port Elizabeth.

I later moved to Phahameng Primary School in Jamestown where I finished the rest of my primary school years. I started high school in 2008 at Lungiso Public High School in Humansdorp and that is where

I matriculated in 2012. I was fortunate enough to start university the following year, at

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University to study towards a Bachelor degree in Education. I am currently doing my 4th year at the same institution, and I am a happy and vibrant young woman who is looking forward to the journey God has prepared for me.



The smile of a broken child

I have always been a full-figured person. Some preferred to call me chubby, fat, big-boned, but my family called me beautiful. They taught me to love and celebrate my uniqueness and believe that I never have to change for anyone because I am just perfect the way I am. Even though I was confident about myself at home I knew my family could not protect me from the cruel world that had painted its own image of what a perfect woman ought to look like in this day and age.

I remember one incident; it was in 2006 and I was doing Grade 6. Our mathematics teacher brought a scale to class. I listened apprehensively as he explained that we would have to weigh ourselves as part of the exercise. Instantly I knew that my worst nightmare was about to turn into reality. I knew I was going to be the heaviest amongst my classmates and this brought up a sudden uneasy feeling in me. I pleaded with the teacher to pardon me and allow me not to be part of the exercise but all he could say to me was, “Don’t be silly, child. All the other children have done it already. You will see that it will be fun.” At this point all the other children had gathered around the scale since I was the only one left to weigh herself. I remember feeling as though I had been asked to undress in a room full of strangers. I felt naked and violated and as I was still deep in thought, loud laughter brought me back to reality. It was just as I thought. I was the heaviest learner in my class and everyone, including my teacher, found this extremely funny. Nothing can ever erase the sound of two voices behind me. It was two boys who had apparently placed bets on my weight. One shouted to the other, “*Zisa imali yam mfethu ndikuxcelele akbukho mntu unoba mkhulu kumale bagn.*” (Give me my money, my friend, I told you no one could be bigger than this pig.) I pushed back my tears with the biggest smile because I knew I could not break down in front of them.

I smiled and laughed with them not because I was happy but because I was hiding my true feelings of disgust, hurt, worthlessness, and ugliness, because this was what I felt for myself—nothing but HATE. Calling me names became something normal

for people to do and as much as these seemed merely like words to them, to me they caused scars that ran so deep they broke my most precious gem, my self-esteem.

Today I look back and say that those experiences may not have healed completely but I am working my way there. I now smile because I know, yes, I am big and yes, I may not meet society's expectations about what constitutes a truly beautiful woman, but I am beautiful, so beautiful that other people's opinions of how I look no longer matter. I smile because I am happy, fully content and satisfied with who I am. I smile because I know all those who spoke to break me have actually helped me build a new me, a me that smiles not because I am broken, but a me that smiles because I am RENEWED.

Our one way ticket out of poverty

I watched silently as the trees, small houses and dusty streets of Kwa-Nomzamo vanished before my eyes. This is my chance, I thought to myself, my moment to shine, an opportunity to re-write my history because I was moving to Port Elizabeth to start a new life as a university student. Leaving home was not easy because it meant that life would be different. No more Mom to protect me, make decisions for me, guide me or even scold me when I digressed and missed my way. But I was confident. I knew my mother had done a great job in raising me to be a woman of substance with high morals and values to lead me on a path to success.

I wonder what the university looks like? Am I going to be able to communicate well in English? What type of a roommate will I get? Will she be nice or will she be a mean person? All those thoughts ran through my mind as I looked through the window of the local taxi. Suddenly the one-hour drive from Humansdorp to Port Elizabeth felt like hours because I was soon approaching my destiny, my one-way ticket out of poverty.

Fitting into this new world was not easy at all. I felt like I was branded on my forehead for everyone to see that this one does not belong here. I did not have fancy

clothes or hairstyles, and no money to buy take-aways from the cafeteria. All I could afford to eat was cereal, a box that should last me at least two weeks. I felt lost, confused, abandoned; I felt like I did not belong. How am I going to survive? This place is not meant for people like me. These negative thoughts bullied my heart into believing that I was not good enough. But wait a minute, if I am not meant to be here then who is? My subconscious voice rose to my defense. Is it because I do not have a father? Is it because my family survives on my brother's minimum wage? Did this mean I do not deserve this education because I am from a poor background? This conversation with myself was a turning point for me. I knew it wasn't going to be easy. Yes, I had to work harder than the average student because the foundation of my education was not as solid as it should have been, but did this mean it was impossible? No! In fact, it was very possible. I could do it, I could do it, and in fact I did it because I remembered my beginning.

I remembered my mother saying "God will be your strength. Where you lack, He will fill because he is not just a God of promises, he is a God of miracles. Now go and come back with that degree, because that is not just a degree, but OUR ONE-WAY TICKET OUT OF POVERTY".

Takatso Mohlomi



I am Takatso but I choose to be called Ntatie on social media (a story for another day). On 6 February 1994 this incredible soul was born in a hospital in Cape Town. I started primary school in 2000 at Phakamani Senior Primary School in a small town called Matatiele, in the Eastern Cape. When I started high school in 2009 I moved to Sidinane Senior Secondary School, in a nearby town called Mount Fletcher. I completed my Grade 12 at the same high school in 2011.

I faced some challenges in 2012 and I had to take a gap year. That led to me starting university at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2013. I am currently doing my 4th year Bachelor of Education. I joined a group of young women called *Girls Leading Change* in 2013 and I'm happily working towards my future.

Crossing the bridge

Being the best you can be brings about the best feeling on planet Earth. However, being that so-called best seems to be the worst for other people watching you. I was raised in a community in which one had to live according to the norms prescribed by the community.

In 2009 I joined the Student Christian Organisation (SCO) at my high school. It is said to be an organisation in which learners are groomed and grown into knowing Christ better, a place where broken hearts are mended and where weak people are given hope. I was excited and looked forward to growing my relationship with the Lord. However, by so doing I did not expect to be pressured into letting go of some of the activities and achievements that I had gained prior to that. While it did groom my strength, confidence, and independence, I also helplessly saw myself losing what I had had. The strange thing is that I had thought I was on the right track during that time, but when I looked back in 2011, I realised that my life was at a crossroad. I saw myself in a position where I had to choose whether I would continue to live to please people or whether I would regain myself and discover my abilities.

You may not understand why I see my decision to join the SCO as great yet destructive choice. I was prevented from pursuing other activities in which I had strengths and passion for. However I do not want to only criticize it. It also shaped me into who I am. Sometimes we never really know what is right or wrong when we are still very young and we then take anything from the adults as the right choice especially when we are indoctrinated with their values and are never given a chance to question anything. I now believe that leaders should lead by walking beside us, not by indoctrinating us with their morals, values, and beliefs. We should be inspired by their good character and choose what we want to follow or learn from them.

I do not even think we should be made to choose in the first place. Our leader made us choose between doing the SCO duties full time or doing extra-mural activities in school. For him, God and the SCO came first. If you chose other extramural

activities beside the SCO, you would be seen as an anti-Christ. Being a young girl raised in a Christian family I had to choose full time participation in the SCO and abandon the abilities and talents I had and were interested in developing. I could no more be a debater, chorister, poet, writer and a socially engaged young girl. I spent all my time focusing on one thing and this limited my circle of communication which hindered me from making decent relations with older people who one could need at a later stage of growing.

Thank God for the inspirational woman who then became my mother away from home. She groomed me for a brighter future and motivated me to recognise and use my strengths. She made me understand that it is OKAY to fall but remaining on the ground is the bigger problem. I was then encouraged to run forward wisely, using all my experiences as life learnt lessons. To this day I stand to be that motivated person and other young people's motivation, too.

As a future teacher, I am looking forward to shaping the lives of young rural boys and girls. I want to encourage them to talk to other people and ask for guidance. I want them to understand that problem-solving does not exist in isolation, and help them to be good judges of all the advice they receive. Listen carefully, think broadly, and act wisely. My advice to myself still stands: Be careful of what you get yourself into, and be wise enough not to live according to people's expectations of your life style. It is your life! Own it responsibly and be SMART.

Unfolding

I realised that I spent my childhood in my early adulthood. From the experience of living up to people's expectations, I learnt to be brave. Starting university has been like a beautiful dawn of my life. I have learnt to embrace who I really am.

Joining the *Girls Leading Change* group motivated me to be the best of who I can possibly be. I got to know this other side of me which I never bothered to look at

before. I got motivated in such a way that I got to be close and true to the person I think I really am:

I take responsibility for my life.

I am wise.

I look before I leap.

I got to unfold and form a strong bond with myself first.

I love to try new things every now and then.

I no longer live in the dark shadow with a mask of shame.

My mission is exploring.

I take pictures (a lot of them)

I learn to pose and pout (I'm excited about it)

I fell in love with me for the first time!

I tell myself that no matter what life throws my way, I should not dwell on it but rather run forward and live joyfully. I now live to embrace my inner strength and not to embarrass my own being.

**To turn our lives into masterpieces
is to know both pain and healing, despair and
hope, darkness and light.**

McManus (2014)

