

BETWEEN ROCK AND THE PAVEMENT: THROUGH THE UNDERWORLD OF DURBAN

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Running headline –Through the underworld of Durban

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the challenges faced by two people recovering from drug addiction in Durban. Both are Black African to use the terminology of our time. One a woman, and the other, a teenager on the edge of youth. This paper uses the life history approach as a way of telling two stories, illustrating the social context in which people's lives are blighted by drug abuse and the recurring problems associated with attempts to overcome addiction. It situates the narrative of these two lives in a city witness to the eroding of apartheid and the opening up of new spaces and challenges. Sensitive to issues of spatiality and temporality, it is a story that, while embedded in local realities, places these issues in the context of broader changes within society.

Keywords: Prostitution, drug abuse, life history, drug addiction, Umthombo, Durban.

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I do a great deal of reading. But I enjoy it much less than I used to. Books and magazines contain generalised notions and only sketch the course of events in the world as best they can; they can never let you have an immediate, direct, animated sense of the lives of Tom, Dick and Harry. If you're not able to understand real individuals, you can't understand what is universal and general (Gramsci, 1973: 136).

INTRODUCTION

For two years now, I have been interviewing people about life on the streets of Durban. I was drawn to life-histories as a way of illustrating how individuals react to their social milieu. This particular project was motivated by the naturalistic inquiry approach. As Denzin and Lincoln explain, this approach:

...involves the studies use and collection of a variety of empirical materials-case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts - that describes routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin& Lincoln, 1994: 2).

Arguably the best definition of naturalistic inquiry is that of Wolf and Tymitz who define it as:

...a *process* geared to the uncovering of many idiosyncratic but nonetheless important stories told by real people, about real events, in real and natural ways...Naturalistic inquiry attempts to present '*slice-of-life*' episodes...representing as closely as possible how people feel, what they know, and what their concerns, beliefs, perceptions and understandings are (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 78).

The life histories presented in this paper occurred at two different points in post-apartheid South Africa and were recorded in detail in 2014. In piecing together the two narratives, I was guided by Polkinghorne's idea of emplotment:

Plot is the narrative structure through which people understand and describe the relationship among the events and choices of their lives. Plots function to compose or configure events into a story by: (a) delimiting a temporal range which marks the beginning and end of the story, (b) providing criteria for the selection of events to be included in the story, (c) temporally ordering events into an unfolding movement culminating in a conclusion, and (d) clarifying or making explicit the meaning events have as contributors to the story as a unified whole (1995: 7).

The first is of Faith Ka-Manzi and is the story of someone I have known for over a decade. I first met her as a journalist at Independent Newspapers. From 2013, I began in some systematic way to piece together her life on the streets of Durban. Faith's story is not just a 'slice-of-life' but a window into the history of Durban itself. Faith was negotiating the streets of Durban in the 1990s when apartheid began to fall and new areas of the city were being opened up to Black people. An intelligent, beautiful and forceful young woman, to this changing social context, Faith became witness to and participant in a world of drugs and nightclubs. In this context, I kept in mind Wright Mills' sociological imagination that seeks "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Wright Mills, 1977: 12).

The second narrative is that of Ntando Msibi, a street child who overcame an addiction to glue sniffing to become a rising star in the surfing world. As his story will indicate, his life presents a somewhat different trajectory to Faith's. Ntando grew up without family, both parents dying, soon followed by his grandmother. Without any support, he quickly found himself amongst other youngsters on the streets, hungry, eager for any form of escape. That escape was discovered and greedily maintained in the form of glue.

In many ways, while divergent, the two narratives are interlinked in that addiction became the overriding feature of their lives, consuming them, propelling them every day to find new ways to access drugs, to overcome the misery, depression and despair that they faced in the adverse conditions of life on the streets. [Both narratives highlight the nature of drug use and homelessness.](#) They also illuminate the particular societal aspects of post-apartheid South African society; stubborn segregation, violence, poverty and lack of prospects. As Auyero et al point out, there are "A plethora of economic and political factors—from insulting levels of inequality, to the informalization of social relations and ensuing precarity, to a punitive and/or delinquent state" which "produce the urban margins *and* foster the violence that pervades them" (Kilanski & Auyero, 2015: 3). In South Africa, the extremes of inequality and particular historical and social relations produced by its' apartheid past have contributed to one of the most violent and crime-ridden societies in the world.

Faith experienced the dying days of apartheid and the rush into freedom. Ntando was born after apartheid and plunged into a world where opportunities are scarce and poverty rife. Both have experienced extreme poverty, both have lived on the streets, become addicted to drugs and have recovered. And in both stories, support networks and care-givers have arisen in different ways to provide them with the strength to overcome their respective addictions.

One woman's journey

Faith Ka-Manzi has lived in Durban most of her life; its topside, gracing the front cover of a popular magazine and strutting her stuff on the cat-walk. She has lived its downside, wandering "*through every crack house and drug den in Durban.*" She has lived with high-flying Nigerian drug lords. She has prostituted herself, selling her body for thirty rand after raking in R30 000 a night for her pimps. Faith was a rock addict, a cocaine addict, a zol smoker, a mandrax (buttons) user, a heavy drinker— she tripped on Ecstasy and smoked. She has wandered the streets of Durban – dirty, stinking, broke and high on drugs.

Faith has officially begun the legal process of changing her birth name, Simangele, which means 'to wonder'. She says she didn't like the name because it made people say things like, "*I wonder what's up with that woman? I wonder about that woman. I wonder what's wrong with that woman. What is the woman about?*" The name made her seem erratic, questionable, difficult to defend and a curious figure. Simangele is questionable. There are doubts surrounding who and what she is. She changed her name to Qhawekazi, which means 'Warrior/Conqueress.' "*I put on my armour. I am in training now. I want to run the Comrades Marathon before I turn 50. I'm 47-years-old.*"

While undergoing her transformation, Faith is fighting a determined battle on behalf of young female sex workers and girls who are being used as drug mules, kept captive by drug lords in filthy, dilapidated buildings where the dark and dangerous players of the narcotics underworld operate. "*I know this is the end. I hate drugs. I asked God is this all Faith Ka-Manzi is supposed to be? What about my hopes and dreams?*"

The story of Faith's recovery started when she reached a nadir in her life:

"I walked to Manor Gardens to a woman who is a pastor and a diamond dealer. She has a beautiful home. I didn't want to go to my home. I was stinking and un-bathed with dirty feet, and sitting on this exquisite furniture. She told her son to get me a towel, soap, a face-cloth, a toothbrush and some of his old clothes. I was so skinny that I drowned in his clothes."

The woman told her that she could stay but only if she got permission from her mother. Faith's mother was very supportive. She turned to the Bible which became her "*medication.*"

Faith has been 'clean' since October 2014 – when she took her last pull on 'the pipe' – her final 'hit'. She attributes her willpower to spirituality. She has had many false starts though. This is not the first time she has tried to quit drugs for good. However, she firmly states that this is the final and firm stand in her efforts to overcome addiction. "*I went to rehab a couple of times and it didn't work. Then I thought about how I was raised. That's when I went to my Bible.*"

The Good Hope Foundation Centre in Phoenix has contributed hugely to Faith's success in conquering her drug habit. It is here she periodically finds sanctuary and speaks to those also struggling to kick the habit.

"Had I tried Ecstasy first I would have never tried rock." Beyond rock, which is very low-grade and cheap cocaine, Faith also went on to use Whoonga, Nyaope and Sugars – various versions of affordable Heroin mixed with rat poison and Anti-Retroviral (ARV) AIDS medication, with a slight change in ingredients and adjustments to the manufacturing method – ranging in price from R15 to R25. Sugars are popular because they 'bring you down' from a high. Faith remembers with pain all the lies and deceit that she got wrapped in as a result of this cocktail of drugs:

“I stole money, cellphones, anything, when I was dirty and high on drugs. When I was on drugs, I met a man – a car guard. He’s uneducated. He only has a Standard 9. But, when I go away and do drugs and come back dirty, he takes me back. But I’ve stopped having sex with him. He can’t have my body – not until we are married. He was devastated when I said, ‘I can’t see you anymore.’ I taught him how to bank. I taught him how to save. I’ve been with him for two years now. I have his bank card. I know his pin number. But I won’t use his money. I can’t. I love him. I’ve deleted memories of lust for all my former lovers. I’ve become like a hermit. I’m looking after my own sanity; my own peace of mind. I’m replenishing my body, my spirit, my career, my life. I’m going to be big. I’m going to be flooded. I’m going to be called to speak – because of the biggest guy – God, my Daddy. I went through a massive restoration, alone, in my room, with God. I’ve become an evangelist. I go to my local HIV Clinic and I motivate people through the Word of God. I start my mornings with devotions. I say, Father God, may I find favour with people I can help. Then I decree and declare. I’m opening my own company in January 2015 – a recycling plant – and I’m creating jobs.”

As a recovering addict and a survivor, Faith still faces daily temptation in her area of Cato Manor – as a mother, addict and aunt. *“I can taste the cigarettes. I can taste the alcohol. I’m a second-hand smoker. I wanted to buy a ‘loose’ [cigarette] two days ago. But I knew that cigarette would lead to a Black Label. I was so distraught and took to my Bible.”*

With a son who has just graduated from university with a degree in Geographical and Environmental Management and a fourteen-year-old niece – her brother’s child – to take care of, Faith feels she needs to keep on the straight and narrow.

“My niece, who I’ve raised, bought clothes for, educated... I wanted to kill her. I wanted to kill myself. She is so rude. She answers back. The facial expressions! She wants to go to parties at the age of fourteen! I am responsible for her education. I want her away for Christmas. I wish her mother would also play some role in her upbringing but as a mother of five kids from four men, she couldn’t care. Instead when I asked for her intervention, she accuses me of having a vendetta against her daughter. How is that possible for someone I have raised since she was five? And yes, I am resentful that she does not contribute the social grant she receives every month for her daughter’s upkeep and says that my brother also does not provide for her daughter. But that is the very reason I took her daughter in, when I saw what condition her kids were living in, I thought I am going to play the role of my brother; that is why the aunt from the father’s side in Zulu is called babekazi (the great father). So I look at my niece and I think, ‘You stay here. You enjoy so many privileges – a big bath to wallow in, hot water, food (and fancy clothes which I used to buy for her but stopped because of her attitude but now need to resume to buy her again to show forgiveness)– and you want to enjoy these privileges and not respect the person who provides them!’”

Faith has taken the job of parenting her niece very seriously, drawing on her own experiences. It illustrates the vital need for support networks in fractured societies. *“In Zulu we*

say, *'These people are living'*. With my niece, I say, *'You saw how (my family) treated me when I was doing drugs and at my lowest, and now you are applying that tone and treatment to me!'*"

Faith remembers one incident very vividly when her niece accused her of abuse and said:

"'I'm dark. I'm ugly'. I told her she is beautiful. I made her confident. I said, 'I've introduced you to things and places you've never known. Is that abuse? You have DSTV at home. Is that abuse? I give you an education. Is that abuse? I clothe you. Is that abuse? You're looked after and well-fed. Is that abuse? I take interest in your school work and encourage you to do your best. Is that abuse?' And she said no. Clearly she has no inkling what the word abuse means."

Faith reflects on the fact that she has two personalities.

"I'm extroverted in the pub. I'm introverted at home. Even though we have DSTV, five minutes is too much for me. I clean my mum's house and then I go to my room and read a good book, or my Bible. I'm not a TV person. When I get married and have a house, you won't find a TV in my home. My bed is usually littered with books, whether fiction or my own work. But one book which is always open by my bed or on my desk at work is my Bible as everyday is a challenge. My son has been my pillar of strength; my biggest supporter – and Professor Patrick Bond (Director of the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal) – through the rain, the gutters, the gullies, the storms. I know what Hell looks like. I don't think there is any opportunistic infection that I have not had. I've had TB four times. Shingles was the worst. I've got scars to prove it. Even the strongest painkillers lasted only five minutes. I also had meningitis; it felt like a million ants eating my brain. At Addington Hospital, they said, 'Oh, it's you again'. I had a stroke in 2004 – the facial one – Bell's Palsy. I was fat. I was a Size 38."

"During that time I got a contract with Metrorail for three weeks to encourage people to know their [HIV] status. I was meant to start on a Monday, but started later. Nobody told me what was wrong with me. Then my son said, 'Mummy what's happened to your face?' Then I knew why everybody in the family was whispering around me. At Metrorail, first I addressed ten people, then thirty, then a hundred, then fifty people. I would stand before them – drivers, engineers, general employees – and I would start by asking them, 'Let's laugh at Faith'. I wanted to get the laughter out of the way. I learnt the beauty of laughing at oneself. I wanted them to focus on my words, not my face. Metrorail was going to pay me R23k. They ended up paying me R24k – because of the 95% turn out. They saw that if this woman knew her status and she was alive and looking good, then I can know my status too."

Faith's body has been ravaged by illness, drugs, violence and abuse. She has decided to take on the Durban drug network like a one-woman army – determined to bring the ringleaders

to their knees and destroy cartels from the highest levels. With some streets of the city in the tight grip of druglords and dealers, this is a task fraught with danger and the threat of violence.

“I’m going to shut down drugs in Durban. I want Durban to tremble when I walk. Social Services have failed me. Government has failed me. The police have failed me. I’m closing down drug dens. I did drugs and now I have the knowledge and the experience, a ‘PhD in Life’ to help people, especially women, to get out of the drug world and close it down. I’m going to stop the drug trade in Durban. I’m going to bring down the dealers.”

Faith first started using drugs in the early nineties. At that time, Durban was a place where a subterranean sub-culture thrived, as people started to negotiate life without racial limits. It was freedom. Bars, restaurants and nightclubs were suddenly opened up to all races. For someone like Faith who wanted so desperately to taste life and all its pleasures, it signalled the opportunity for everything; hedonism, alcohol, drugs. It wasn’t long before she was an eager participant.

“I smoked my first cigarette in 1991. One night in 1997, while chilling at the Bat Centre, a drug peddler said to me, ‘Come and try this’. That was the first time I smoked rock. Drug dealers are very devious. They want you to get hooked. Another person, who is already addicted, sees that you have money, and they try to get you onto drugs so that when the drugs run out, you are eager to buy the next round, and the next round. I’ve gone with people’s cards to ATM to draw money for more drugs – doctors, lawyers, and wealthy people. I walked the streets with my rock pipe.”

“White men would stop me when I lived on the streets, and they would take me to have sex. I would say to them, ‘First let me take my sex drug’. Then I would light it and smoke it. Then I would offer them, and I would blow smoke into their mouths, and when it hit them, their eyes would bulge. A man taught me how to use drugs, so I decided I will teach a man to use drugs.”

“The girls who are being held in drug dens, and that are being trafficked for sex have had every kind of penis inside of them – thick ones, long ones, painful ones – and they want to get out. They say to me, ‘Please Mama Faith, come get me. I am ready. My bags are packed. I want to leave.’ As a prostitute, there were times when I could make as much as ten thousand rand (with a smoking client) a night for the Nigerians and I was given only thirty rand for food. I was raped by the police while on the street. Which sex worker can say, ‘I have never been raped’? Prostitutes are products of abuse in one way or another. It took me years to fall in love with Faith Ka-Manzi.”

Faith was sexually abused by a relative when she was in her early teens. It’s a memory she carries everyday and for a long time determined her attitude to sex:

“I thought that when a man turned his back in bed, it was because you had done something wrong. You think to yourself, ‘What is wrong with me tonight?’ Because that is what you are taught to believe. You think you are only good for as long you give your sex. A sex-abused woman can never say, ‘No’.”

“Now I’ve met this man who loves me for me. I wanted to sleep with him. But then I said to myself, ‘Don’t rush’. I told him I was HIV positive. Then we made love. We became committed. Two months later, he told me that he was HIV positive. This is the longest relationship of my life.”

“You know why I’m not scared of AIDS? How can you be scared of something so minute that you can only see it under a microscope? The virus is scared of Faith! I’m the hostess! How can you kill me, if you need me to live? I talk to the virus. I tell my virus, ‘If I die, AIDS, you die with me!’ FAITH: It means the substance of things to hope for and the evidence of things not seen. I told my son, when he was in my womb, ‘You are going to be young successful and handsome’. I make love to myself. I’m self-reflective. You cannot see beauty if you have not seen it in yourself.”

Faith is constantly thinking ahead. To a better life, to a book that she is writing which describes the difficulties she has faced throughout her life, and the work that she hopes to carry out in the community:

“When I recover, I’m going to travel the world with a bucket, collecting all the pain, and when I’m done, I’m going pour it into a forest and burn it, and create an environmentally-friendly product out of it.”

She really believes she has turned the corner. But, as celebrity and recovering heroin addict Russell Brand reflects, most addicts think about drugs every day, no matter how long it is since they gave up. The danger of relapse is strong, especially when life does not go according to plan. He describes the feeling: “This shadow is darkly cast on the retina of my soul and whenever I am dislodged from comfort my focus falls there” (*The Guardian*, 9 March 2013). Faith knows she too faces an uphill battle, but she also knows she has a chance.

“The drug life is over but I still have to prove myself. There are so many stories I want to tell. I have an office at UKZN with my name on the door. I’m a small girl, from a small town, but I’m still Faith Ka-Manzi, after all. I Am No Saint.”

About a month ago, Faith felt totally incapacitated emotionally, physically, mentally, and psychologically. Nothing worked, on her and for her. She was alienated from her body and was now severely reacting to the last TB medication of the initial phase, RIFAFOUR.

“Almost two weeks before I had to go to my local clinic to start the second phase (REFIFINAH), I stopped the medication as I was starting to hallucinate and had periodic physical shutdowns. But before stopping entirely, I had prayed and consulted some organs in my body like my liver, my heart, my lungs and others

and they all sent me messages that it was RIFAFOUR, and that they couldn't cope with it anymore. So I stopped immediately but continued with the ARVs – my darling pills. I started recovering two days from then and a week later went to my local TB clinic and received the second phase of my TB medication, the REFIFINAH. My organs are quiet except for insomnia and the bloody worms. They are back – so when I am ravenous, I don't know whether it's for these parasites or for me and until my next visit to the ARV clinic, I have to wait to get medication to get rid of them. My weight is up a bit and I can now think clearly and do my work with enthusiasm.”

Spiritually, emotionally as well as intellectually, Faith is slowly recovering. She now weighs a healthy 70kg – and she is tall with a strong-boned, supermodel-healthy frame. However, she is again living at home knowing that her mother wants her out of the house. It is torture for her.

“Oh how I love staying in Cato Manor among these progressive workers – a sprinkling of the middle class and a lot of poor people. It's my heartbeat and to know that I have to move away fills me with anguish. But what am I to do? The great development though is that I have stopped smoking, drinking and other destructive habits and I am becoming a kind of spiritual hermit. Freedom as a woman, one who has had so much flak in her life means no sexual relationships with either sex by choice. I find it so liberated that neither do I desire my own or the opposite sex – and don't even yearn for a partner.”

Faith has sworn off sex with her car-guard partner until marriage. She has taken a vow of celibacy. And although, they've been sexual before, she wants to hold off having sex with him and wait for marriage. She refuses to approach sex casually anymore. She has learnt to slow down, to have patience.

“My financial status quo humbled me to face reality as I could not afford ARVs through a private doctor. The initial testing, consultation with specialists, plus the ARV prescription was quoted at almost R10 000. So I was faced with only one option – accessing ARVs from my local HIV/AIDS clinic. So, on a cold July morning, as I suffered bouts of pain from a totally compromised immune system, I dragged myself to the clinic. It was not yet 8am and the queue was already very long. But I was quite chuffed that as a latecomer I did not have to join that line, and in a few hours, I was out, but not without a lashing from a nursing sister for defaulting. Her reaction when I told her was that I return home as she was not in the habit of dealing with people on suicide missions, but rather to help people who wanted to live. I kept my cool knowing that I had put myself in that position and deserved the tongue lashing. Anyway, I had neither the emotional nor physical strength to argue, but to quietly accept and agree that defaulting was entirely my fault. The circumstances leading to my default had been extenuating. I was counselled, sent to social workers and had blood samples taken and was sent straight away to a preparation class. It was a Monday and I was only to start ARVs on Wednesday when my blood test results were back.”

“Phew, what a relief! Upon my return to the clinic on Wednesday, my CD4 count results were the lowest ever – 88. Never before, despite all the major opportunistic sicknesses I had encountered, had it ever dropped so low. No wonder my whole body was shutting down, there was hardly any defence left in my immune system. Twenty six days later, I look like health personified. No thrush, I am gaining weight, I can move around easily, I am eating like a horse (as usual) – thanks to Ntombi, my foster daughter/sister, who looks after me. But during all this time, I’ve been crushed by depression, mental and emotional trauma, fearing the unknown. Again, it is the burden of being a breadwinner which bears heavily on me. Not only do I not want to do it anymore, but I resent it.”

Faith describes herself as a

“delinquent and absconding ARV patient” – escaping. “It is what I have been since early March when I last had my AIDS medicines. So this is what I have become – absconding from a responsible lifestyle – sick. Very sick. But thank God I am recovering now after spending almost two weeks at a local hospital at the beginning of July and once again being diagnosed with TB. So I am back to those dreadful TB pills which are so huge and difficult to swallow. Oh, how I wish there were an alternative to this infection. And for the past three months, my life has been warped with neither meaning nor direction. Each day has been lived as it comes. I have lived a tragic life and I am so traumatised by it and want out, but somehow after watching the documentary ‘Sicko’ by Michael Moore, I have come to the conclusion that I should move to Canada, either to study or work or both (Sometimes you have to walk away from people, not because you don’t care, but because they don’t). The advantage of living in Canada is that its healthcare is free, of high standard and without hassle. I need to get out of this country, from my family, who have also contributed to some of the pain of abuse I have suffered as an incest survivor, the shouldering of the family’s needs since my late teens as breadwinner, and as a Black woman being told repeatedly that the contribution I have made towards taking care of them (sometimes through very dangerous means, and sometimes even sexually sacrificing the fundamental Christian principles I was brought up with to make sure that there was food on the table) in the end means nothing as I can’t have any share of the family house because I am a woman.”

Will Faith stay ‘clean’? Will she continue to access ARVs? Will she register for her Master’s degree? Will she settle into a relationship?

What Faith’s life teaches us is that to understand drug addiction is to understand a myriad of challenges facing Black women on the streets and in the household. It shows a person always teetering on the margins, trying to find a safe place. Faith says she owes her recovery to the power of God. This has become a familiar refrain in South Africa as Pentecostal and evangelical churches have sought to provide havens and places for rehabilitation through the possibility of

being saved. The joining of evangelical Christianity and drug recovery has provided the conditions to “ultimately silence structural forces while laying blame on individual action. Addiction is not a sickness, these centers say. Addiction is a sin (Committee Against Torture 2013). There is no cure, pastors plead. There is Jesus” (O’Neill & Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2015: 76).

It is what Lauren Berlant has called a “cruel optimism”. It is the “kind of relation in which one depends on objects that block the very thriving that motivates our attachment in the first place” (Berlant in O’Neill 2015). “For it seems perverted to preach about having a positive attitude, about bootstrapping an almost unattainable kind of subjectivity, in such dire circumstances, especially when a far more macro-scale, far more critical analysis is certainly in order” (in O’Neill & Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2015: 87).

As to whether Faith will stay clean, I have no idea. The temptation to relapse is strong and the hurdles she has to jump in order to fulfil her ambitions are so high and so many that she could easily lurch back into the street and fall back into the netherworld. Anything could spark a relapse and provide the opening for her to lean on drugs for succour. Because life histories continually change and are often subject to forces beyond our control.

Surfing not sniffing

The second narrative of this paper is that of Ntando Msibi. Not many drug addicts can survive on the streets, living in poverty, go days without eating and then bounce back into society to become one of South Africa’s child icons on the surfing sector. But Ntando Msibi, 17, proved he could not only overcome his drug addiction but take to the waves and become an outstanding surfer. Ntando lives by the adage: “*For me it is surfing and not sniffing.*”

Like many of the street kids that haunt the robots and stop-streets of Durban, Ntando drowned his misery by sniffing glue. It killed the hunger and lifted his spirits. With other street kids, they felt themselves like modern day bandits, hiding from the police and scrounging and scavenging for morsels to eat. For a whole year, his body ached for glue and for a whole year he found ways to get a fix. Now belonging to a group calling themselves, ‘Surfers, not Street Kids’, and two years on from his drug addiction, Ntando is an ambassador and mentor for young teenagers who have taken to the streets to live. Once a resident of the famous Skate Park’s pavement, which he made his home, Ntando today is a changed teenager.

Ntando’s journey into the City started when he was just 11 years old. Until then, he had lived at his grandmother’s house in KwaMashu. His grandmother had taken care of him when his parents passed away. When grandma too passed away in 2005, Ntando thought his world had spiralled out of control. “*Life had become a roller coaster for me. Nothing was working out at home, and I knew I had to look after myself. I then made my way to Durban and made the streets my home.*” Home is the operative word. The pavement was his bed.

For almost two years, Ntando lived on the streets, begging and doing what he could to earn a living. It was on the streets that he met his surfing mentor, Sandile Mngadi, a surfing

coach who was part of the organisation called Umthombo Street Children.¹ Umthombo pioneered the idea of fusing high intensity engagement programmes, such as surfing, with psychosocial services as a model for empowering street children towards alternatives to street life. It was run by husband and wife team Tom Hewitt and Bulelwa “Mandi” Hewitt.

Mnqadi became part of the KwaZulu-Natal Surfriders Association, a development organisation for aspirant surfers, and together with Hewitt, encouraged and mentored Ntando into surfing. *“I took to the water like a fish. I had something to do during the day. So I turned to glue sniffing in the evening as it helped me gain more confidence not having fear on the streets. When I was in the water I was in control of my life and the water was there to calm me.”*

Ntando is currently fourth in the SA junior rankings. He also came fourth in the Billabong Junior Series in East London in April 2014. He is being groomed for international surfing competitions after the phenomenal progress he has made. He has travelled to foreign shores to surf which has fuelled his desire to become a full-time professional. He recognises that the hardships of life on the street lead him into a life on drugs.

“But when the tide was down I had nowhere to go to, the Skate Park was my home. Sleeping under the pavement with other children was not what I wanted my life to be. I had no option. Nowhere to go. This was no life. I was not comfortable being around the streets. Sniffing the glue made me forget the reality of my life. I was not able to afford regular food or clothing to keep warm.”

Ntando tried to forget his poverty and hunger by inhaling the glue.

“It was cheap. Just R12 a bottle. I would stand at the corner of the traffic lights and beg for money. It would make me calm if I sniffed. I would forget that I was hungry. I would think of movies and monsters. I used to enjoy the surfing. Surf in the day and sniff glue in the evenings. But then I was told I was really messing my body. That I was a young man and if I continued this way, I would hurt my body. My limbs would go first.”

It was not easy for Ntando to simply quit the glue sniffing which he had done for one year.

“Honestly, if I was able to surf at night I would not have sniffed the glue. This glue kind of dissolved the membrane of my brain cells and caused hallucinations as well as dampening the pangs of hunger. I would scratch in bins and find food. But eventually, the glue made me sleep easier and forget the realities of my life. There were times when the Metro police would round up the street children and abandon us in areas far away from the city so that they could clean up the beachfront. I would not even remember how I got back from places like Umhlali back to Durban. Glue did that to me. It left me constantly on a high.”

¹Umthombo Street Children is a South African Section 21 Company and Non-Profit organisation that provides an alternative to life on the streets. It links social workers and child-care trained former street children to mentor and empower street children (Umthombostreetchildrensa.org)

What Ntando found was that sniffing glue empowered vulnerable children, as young as seven and eight to cope with any situation on the street. Almost all street children were addicted to glue sniffing because of hunger and the influence of friends. Some children used as many as 15 tubes a day (one tube of glue can be used four to five times) and many used it as a substitute for regular meals. *“Sometimes I wish I was home even if it means living without food because I would not have to suffer like this. But then there was no one at home. Who do I turn to?”* His health started to deteriorate, with chest pain often convulsing his body.

But still this just encouraged the dependence on glue. *“I forget everything. I won’t feel cold and hungry and can sleep easily, but then what else was there for my life?”*

Despite all the gloom which presented itself after Ntando left the water, he made friends with another surfer Warwick Wright, whose mother, Ann, also an active member of Surfing South Africa and the KZN Surfriders Association, encouraged him to break the drug habit and started teaching him life skills. Both Ann Wright and Ntando spent long hours talking about his addiction. Msibi realised he had to overcome his fear on the streets. He had to extend his confidence from the ocean to the streets. While glue was an addiction on some level, if he was able to find comfort in the evening, this would be the crucial intervention and ultimately turn things around.

Wright, along with other professional surfers, worked on Ntando’s confidence and enhanced his life skills while also tutoring him in the surf. During this period, Hewitt brought a few street children together and provided a safe and stable place for the surfers to live in. Hewitt formed a new global street children advocacy/surfing team, Surfers Not Street Children.

“Eventually with Tom’s help, I was living in an apartment with other surfers, some street kids also who were keen on the sport. I am able to surf in the day and have a safe and secure place to sleep at night. I am able now to make the best out of surfing and become the best surfer I can be. It pushes me to break free of the limits that hold me down.”

But Ntando has not turned his back on where he has come from. He can often be seen talking to other street children, empowering and counselling them.

“I cannot provide a place for them to stay. But I can tell them what they should not do. That they can become involved in arts and crafts and even surfing. Because the water is your drug. It keeps you on a high. I am a living example of someone who has quit the drugs. I am someone who has travelled to Ecuador to take part in a surfing competition and did extremely well. I hope to travel to Hawaii soon if I obtain a sponsor.”

Ntando is extremely content now. He has found himself a girlfriend. *“She is so beautiful. I was so scared to talk to her at first. I realised immediately if I could fight drugs, and take on fierce rapids then I will be ok chatting with her. I plucked up the courage and now she is my girlfriend.”*

Like most youngsters, Ntando Msibi now hangs out in shopping malls with his skateboard and he adores One Direction, humming 'The Story of My Life'. Some life.

New beginnings?

This paper has brought together two life histories in Durban which, while they overlap, unfold during two different periods. Faith faced challenges of abuse, not only as a drug addict, but also as a woman placed in dangerous situations which led to physical and sexual abuse. Ntando, living on the streets of the city after apartheid collapsed, was lucky to get out quickly and be embraced into a network of support. There are many who are not so fortunate. It is this network of support and the skills and self-confidence of pursuing a sport he loves that gives one a sense that Ntando will stay clean. For Faith, things are more contingent, more fluid. She has not held down a full-time job for a long time. Her personal relationships are rocky and volatile. Her chances of staying the course seem slimmer.

Postscript

It is June 2015. Friends cannot get hold of Faith. Talk on the street is that she has gone on a huge binge. She does not answer my calls.

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