

Education Post

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**Former street child
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**AUNTIE
GERTRUDE**

While others imitate  **we originate**

Former street child champ

Story by Sydney Mungala and pictures by Cynthia Phiri

TWENTY FIVE-year-old Sevelino Vasco carries almost all the oddities that an average child only confines to imagination.

For one his surname sounds misplaced for someone with a smooth flow of Bemba, a record of attempted suicide, barely knowing his birthday, all these bits rolled into one embodying the person in the former street child.

"I am 25 years-old and the first born in my family and was born in Choma, Southern Province. I cannot remember my exact birthday, as you know us on the streets do not celebrate birthdays," he says.

Sevelino has a scanty recollection of his childhood and remembers being told that his mother died when he was seven months old.

"My mother died when I was seven months (laughs) that is what I was told, but I know her name used to be Alice," he says.

"Then my dad married another woman and they had a child who became my step brother. Unfortunately my step mother and my father died in a road accident."

With the death of his father, agony crept into Sevelino's life consigning him to the rural part of Choma in Masuku area where he was taken in by relatives.

"After my father died my life fell apart because he was from Angola that is why my name is Vasco. The relatives of my step-mother were the only family I knew and they took me in at that time," recounts the former street child.

Sevelino's first rude treat was when he was enrolled in grade six even after he had been set to enter grade nine.

"I was in grade nine when they (relatives) took me and they enrolled me in grade six. From Choma town they took me to Masuku Basic School," he says.

"There were a lot of things that were happening. I remember one time at school they had given us a test and the teacher saw my results and the way I was answering questions," Sevelino narrates.

"So one day they set me up and gave me a paper for grade seven because grade seven was the highest grade and the highest mark I got was 98 per cent then the highest in grade seven got 78 per cent so the teachers discussed and realised there was something wrong."

Even after it was established that he was wrongly enrolled in grade six, his guardians cited lack of resources.

"I told them that I was supposed to be in grade nine but my guardians said there was no place in grade nine so the school looked for a grade nine place for me at Masuku Secondary School."

"They told me to tell my guardians to come to school on a Wednesday and they offered me a place. Unfortunately my guardians told me to hang on as they claimed they had no money and started sending me to herd cattle."

Frustrated by the goings on in the house, Sevelino demanded that his guardians sell part of the cattle left by his father to pay for his education.

"I suggested that since my dad had left cattle they could sell one cow and pay my school fees and what I was told shocked me," he somberly says.

"They showed me documents that they had bought all the cattle that my father left. That was in 1995."

At this stage Sevelino had not been hit with the ultimate utterance that was to set him on a different and uncertain path.

"One day after I insisted with school they sent one of their children to get keys and give me telling me, 'here are the keys to your father's (late) house go and open so that your father gives you money for school' That really hurt me. So that is how I just started off on foot towards Choma," he sadly recalls.

With some luck, half the trip was made on a hiked truck that dropped him in Choma town where his next stop was at his father's grave.

"After that I went to my father's grave and spent time there. I was even sleeping there. In fact my father left land in Choma which we have since repossessed now," he says.

Taking himself away from painful memories

Sevelino took the train to Livingstone with some new found friends.

His spell in Livingstone was a brief one as he then headed to the mining town of Kitwe on the Copperbelt in 1996.

"From Livingstone after linking up with friends we then went to Kitwe. Kitwe is where I learnt how to speak this Bemba I am speaking and there I learnt how to fight and steal from people," he says.

A year's experience on the Copperbelt motivated him to experience the promises of the capital city Lusaka.

"So when I came to Lusaka I just used to stay in town and there were people coming from Fountain of Hope centre to teach us about God," Sevelino says.

"But then I had lost faith in people because people that had promised to keep us after the death of our parents mistreated us. The same people used to treat us well when our parents were still alive had turned their back on me... so when outreach workers used to come here I never used to believe them and just said they are lying because I had heard such stories before."

Calamity struck once again as Sevelino witnessed the death of a friend on the street sending him into shock.

"I remember one day I was in town with a friend we were chasing each other after I had grabbed something from him and for me I crossed the road but as he tried to cross he was hit by a car and died," he grieves.

"After that I was deeply affected and just wanted to end my life. That is how I drank pesticide and surprisingly I did not die and was taken to the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) 1998."

The suicide attempt landed Sevelino at UTH where the church people (Lusaka Baptist Church) regularly visited him and loaded him with Christian literature.

"At the UTH I was surprised the Baptist Church people visited me because I used to openly refuse their sermons, telling them that there was nothing they could tell me," says the former Nchelenge Boys High school pupil.

Upon being discharged, Sevelino was taken to Fountain of Hope street children drop in centre where he underwent counselling and rehabilitation.

"After being discharged I was brought to the centre here in 1998-99 in the counselling class to try and change my way of thinking," he says.

"In 1999 I wrote grade seven again and normally I should have completed in 1999. So I wrote my exams and passed and we were taken to Ebenezer for our grade eight we were five the first group at the centre."

Encouraged by the enrollment at Ebenezer in grade eight Sevelino fell for his street adapted ways in 2000.

"So in 2000 we were in grade eight with four other former street children and I had a weakness, I loved beer, smoking and fighting every time after school," he says.

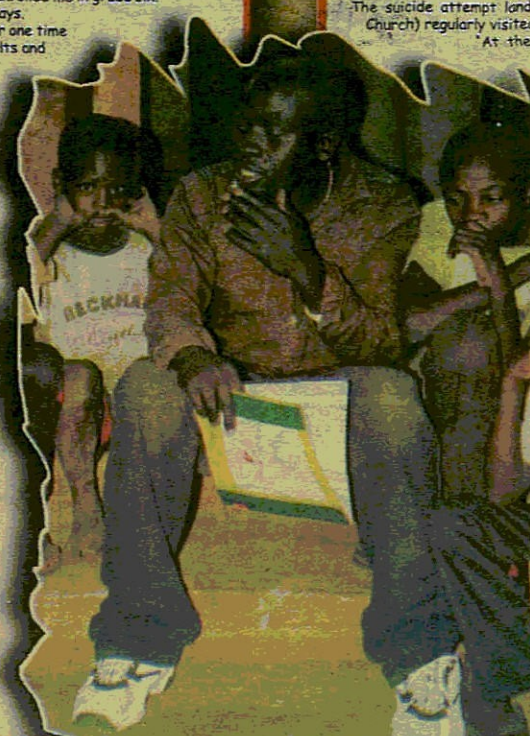
It was this drinking habit that was to briefly disrupt his life in October 2000 on his way back from school.

"In October 2000 towards the end of grade eight we were coming from drinking with my friends and we got involved in a fight with another guy over a girl and he actually hit our friend on the eye and we thought he had damaged our friend's eye and that is how the fight ended into the other guy dying," he says.

Following a period of uncertainty, Sevelino was later to end up at boarding school in Nchelenge largely for need of a change of scene.

"When the case was sorted the people at the centre sent me and another friend to Nchelenge Boarding for our grade nine," he says.

"The people at fountain sent for me for reasons I could not



Underprivileged children find it easy to relate with Sevelino (c) and often gather around him

"The people at fountain sent for me for reasons I could not



...he now works at the Fountain of Hope in Kamwala haven for disadvantaged and street children that also provides a library facility

ons literacy

understand and after the case had been settled, my friend and I were taken to Nchelenge High Boarding School in 2001 grade nine."

The experience of the lads at Nchelenge was one of mixed experiences as Sevelino's friend ended up being expelled after beating up the school headmaster.

"So we went to Nchelenge. By then the headmaster must have been former minister of education Andrew Mulenga and my friend beat him up and he was expelled," he says.

Sevelino struggled to adapt to the school's disciplinary code.

"You know on the streets we have an individual and freestyle life. Nobody tells you what to do but in school there are rules. So like you wake up at a certain time and going for prep and when you want to go out you need a pass (permission) and you have to be in uniform and obeying prefects or addressing teachers as "sir". For me it was quite a difficult thing to do," he says.

"So the administration just let me be and allowed me to sit grade 9 examinations and I passed but was not given a place because of indiscipline."

Once back at the centre renewing sponsorship proved problematic until the Baptist Church stepped in and offered to pay school fees in 2002.

"I started at Ebenezer again along Chilimbulu road up to 2004 when I completed."

Ultimately Sevelino is the only one who saw off the rest of his academic pursuits as the rest of his friends fell by the wayside.

"I changed in grade 11. There were just too many cases happening like each time. I went drinking, a lot of assault cases followed me and even after my friends died, I realised it was time to change," he solemnly says.

"My friends used to fear me so I was isolated because sometimes I could just burst in anger and beat up my friends, telling them that at least they had parents to worry about... then I came to know God because to me He never existed."

"I used to ask myself if there is God how can He allow me not to see my mother and then how can He take my father away from me and how can He allow people to grab our properties and then send me on the streets then you tell me about God? It never made sense to me until then I realised there is a reason everything happened so I came to know God."

Sevelino says the realisation of the mercies of God compelled him to reach out to street children.

"I looked back and thought I could have died a long time ago but it is all by God's grace that I am still alive so then I realised when I drank pesticide the people who took me to hospital are friends from the street so I told myself whatever I am going to do I am going to dedicate it to friends on the street," he declares.

The former street child is the librarian at Fountain of Hope and also the caretaker. His work routine involves going on the streets enlisting street children for the daily library programme. Sevelino is currently an employee of the institution and hopes to pursue social work to bolster his street children outreach programme.

Sevelino once attempted suicide after he witnessed a friend die on the streets

66 When I drank pesticide the people who took me to hospital are friends from the street so ... whatever I am going to do I am going to dedicate it to them 99

Fact file

Real name: Sevelino Vasco

Occupation: Librarian, Fountain of Hope, Lusaka

Age: 25

Known for: Dedicating his time to inspiring street children towards an education

Trivia: Orphaned as a baby, he grew up on the streets of Choma, Livingstone, Kitwe and Lusaka

