

Blikkiesdorp, March 2018

I greet everyone at HOPE – I stay in Blikkiesdorp B96. I am Maureen, the grandmother of Nakeesha Philander.

My story is my daughter died at the age of 27 years old. She left behind her two little girls, Nakeesha and two year old Kashiefa. I look after the children but it's very difficult (financially?) because I am still in the application process for foster grants. SASSA takes its own time.

All these years Nakeesha has been at the HOPE crèche with Tannie Maria, a great Godly woman. Tannie teaches the children to spell their names, identify colours, the alphabet – a,b,c,d,e... and how to count. Nakeesha learnt very fast and by January this year Tannie said she was ready for school. I was worried because I don't work and I can't afford a school uniform for the child.

Luckily I found a place at Leiden Primary School but Nakeesha first had to undergo a school-readiness assessment and orientation before the school would accept her for Grade 1. Although I was concerned, I need not have been because I knew that Tannie had prepared our child well for school. Nakeesha passed! God is great!

HOPE provided Nakeesha with a brand new school uniform and shoes as well as a backpack and stationery – everything she needs. I am so fortunate that Nakeesha is part of the HOPE family. When her mother died in 2017, Nakeesha cried a lot but she said "Tannie and HOPE is now my family – my mother and my father." On Wednesday, January 17th I took Nakeesha to school for the first time and I cried because it should have been her mother taking her to school. I noticed the tears in her eyes too, she was thinking the same thing. Thank you Tannie for your patience, loyalty and for caring about other people's wellbeing. You never judge people and always treat everybody equally, not matter what race or colour. Thank you Pauline, thank you HOPE, and thanks to the sponsors – God will reward you all one day!

*With thanks,
Grandmother Maureen*

Maureen's Story

I read Maureen's letter handwritten on three pages of paper torn from a school notebook and remembered the woman I met nearly a year ago at the HOPE containers. She was in conversation with a group of women, encouraging them to read the Bible and pray, to believe that they would be blessed with a brighter future, to be grateful for the work of HOPE Cape Town. The woman stood tall and spoke with authority but hidden behind the serene expression in her eyes, the windows of her soul suggested that she had lived through tough times. It was evident that she was respected as a wise elder by the younger women in the community. Within every story there lies another story and I was interested to know the series of events that led this woman of stature to Blikkiesdorp in 2007. So, after instructing the children to leave the shack, together we sat on her bed for a long time and Maureen told me her story, the unedited and uncensored version. It was painful for her to go back in time and relocate the memories but she was willing to visit those dark places, she is a very brave woman.

Born into a family with extreme anti-social and violent behavior, Maureen was the oldest of 5 sisters. In order to protect her younger siblings from paternal rape she offered herself to their father and waited in fear every night for him to call her for sex while her mother slept after a hard day of labour as a domestic worker. When Maureen was 8 years old her father was jailed for murder and the children were removed from the family home in Mitchell's Plain and placed with an aunt in Hanover Park. The violence continued in the aunt's house until such time that the situation became untenable for Maureen and her little sisters and they ran away from their foster home and lived on the streets until they were given shelter by the Catholic sisters in Hanover Park. For the first time in their young lives and for too short a time they felt safe at the convent.

During Maureen's early teens and after his release from jail, the girls' father found employment with the Defence Force in Ysterplaat. It appeared that the parents were getting their act together and following a home visit with a social worker the sisters were removed from the convent and relocated with their parents in Mitchell's Plain. Maureen attended Mondale High School. Soon after, the violence in the home resumed, their father beat their mother regularly. Maureen recollects a day when he dug graves for his daughters and forced them to jump into the holes where he threatened to kill them. Fearing for their lives, the girls clung to each other for support but Maureen could no longer protect them from their father as he abused each one of them physically and sexually, over and over. They made a pact with each other to end their lives by drinking a domestic cleaning liquid but the next morning they were all still alive. Then they decided that they would kill their father by pouring petrol around him while he dozed off in a chair. Maureen lit the match but threw it in the wrong direction and nearly burnt herself instead. This infuriated her father and he



beat her up. The next day at school with her wounds still fresh and obviously in pain the school principal called for the services of a social worker to attend to Maureen. The family was interviewed, it was the children's word against their parents' and the mother denied any wrongdoing on the father's behalf so the magistrate at the Athlone Court sent Maureen back home but this time she would have none of it, she refused to return to the house of abuse and went to live on the streets. When she needed money for food she had sex with men in their cars, but that was by choice. On many occasions she was raped and not compensated by men under the influence of alcohol or drugs or simply

because they were bullies and she was vulnerable. This is how she came to be infected with the HI virus and gave birth to her first daughter Chantal, the mother of Nakeesha and Kashiefa. For 27 years, every time she looked into the eyes of her eldest child she was reminded of the older man who had raped and infected her, and left her alone, afraid and pregnant as she discovered later. Shortly after Chantal's birth Maureen gave her up for adoption because she couldn't cope with the memories of the rape, but the child was abused by her adoptive parents and Maureen took her back and tried to transcend the painful memories of her own abuse at the hands of her father and other men.

Chantal was a feisty child and learned from a young age to stand up for herself and to protect her two younger half-sisters. Their father was Sotho-speaking and deserted Maureen soon after the birth of Edwina. He never supported the little family.

Two years ago Chantal was visiting friends in Q Block of Blikkiesdorp, where most of the foreign nationals reside. A Congolese man was fighting with his girlfriend and Chantal intervened in an attempt to defend the young woman but she got in the man's way and was beaten with a heavy metal chain and lock and sustained severe injuries. Two days later Chantal died of internal bleeding and her two small daughters were suddenly orphaned. Maureen had no option but to take on the responsibility of caring for them.

Her second daughter – Samantha was sixteen years old when she was shot 17 times while walking to a house-shop in Blikkiesdorp. The perpetrator said it was a mistake. How do you make the same mistake 17 times? The neighbours did not allow Maureen to see Samantha's lifeless body in the sand, she was

unrecognizable after the damage done by 17 bullets at close range.

Maureen is 53 years old. She is HIV positive, has a low CD4 count and is rapidly losing weight despite being on treatment and regularly attending the HIV clinic at Somerset Hospital. She says that her only reason for not giving up on life is that her youngest daughter is only seventeen and too young and immature to be the caregiver of the two grandchildren. "It's too much of a responsibility for Edwina. She dropped out of school in Grade 9 because she was worried about me after the deaths of my two older daughters. (Ed)Wina wants to start night-school at Hindle Road High but she doesn't want to leave me alone. Last month our shack caught alight and people came to rescue us. They were very kind. That's what we do here, we help one another. Anastacia from HOPE grabbed Kashiefa, the two-year old and escaped the flames else she would have been burnt alive. We were not harmed but lost a lot of our belongings and at least someone helped by putting up new corrugated iron sheets where the others had been destroyed in the fire." Maureen is not eligible for any financial assistance from the State, "I have applied for a grant because I look after my grand-daughters but that application takes a long time to process and I can only get an old-age pension in seven years' time. So, for now, I have no income whatsoever. My wish is that I can have a char job, even if it's just two days a week...I used to char for an old Muslim couple in Mitchell's Plain but they also passed away. I want to work and earn, I don't want money for nothing. I like to work. In 2015 I put my name down for a house but it's going to take many years before I get a house for us. Meantime, we get food from HOPE, from the soup kitchen. HOPE has been very good to us. What I like about HOPE is that it doesn't matter who you are or what you have or don't have, HOPE still loves you and helps you. I got to know the work of HOPE through the Nutrition Group. That was a very good project, they taught us how to prepare good but cheap meals, it's such a pity it ended in 2014. I wish they would bring it back, many people benefitted from the club and we (HIV+ people) need that support, we used to chat about our problems and the healthy foodstuff we need to keep us from getting sick. Otherwise, I just keep going, day by day and... pray."



In spite of her history of abuse and hardship, Maureen still has faith which she puts into action. She is an integral part of the *Walking Bus Project* initiated by the Western Cape Provincial Government's Community Safety Improvement Partnership. Along with about 20 people from the Blikkiesdorp community, Maureen gets up early every morning and walks the children from their homes to the schools in Delft. Once the children are safe within the school grounds, she turns around and walks the long distance back home. In the afternoons, she puts on her official waistcoat and returns to the schools to collect the children and

escort them safely home. This labour of love is done on every school day of the year regardless of the weather, harsh heat with no shade to walk in, or strong winds that send icy cold temperatures through clothing that can't protect her, and the work is voluntary - it is done without any compensation from any of the government structures. "They say they don't have a budget for the children's safety. So then we must look after our children..." says Maureen, "...terrible things can happen to them on the way to school. At least I can prevent it. When Chantal died and left me with her two little girls, I also wanted to die. I often think about cutting my pulse, I've done it before, look here, you can still see the marks." She points to the scars on her wrists and my heart aches for this woman who has gone through more pain than any human being should need to experience. As a child she endured the most horrific abuse in order to protect her younger siblings. There were times when she wanted to give upon life, yet she goes on relentlessly and continues to trust that better days will arrive. I admire her tenacity so much. Nakeesha is nearly nine years

old. Last year Tannie Maria prepared her for school and helped Maureen to enroll Nakeesha at a primary school. By the time Nakeesha entered Grade 1, she had already learned shapes as well as some numeracy and literacy skills. More importantly, Tannie Maria



takes time and effort to teach the children how to behave in a group environment, social skills that they do not learn at home. By the time they are ready to attend school, they have learnt how to share things, how to listen when people talk with them, how to use cutlery and eat at a table for example. Maureen is so proud of Nakeesha's academic achievements. "Look at her first report, she got a 7 in Maths! And such nice comments from the teacher, Nakeesha integrates well with the other learners in her class. She is a pleasant child and obedient." Maureen's eyes glaze over, "I wish her mother was still here to see her grow. Every night I cry about my daughters. I will never forget how they looked in the morgue. (Na)Keesha still cries at night, she misses her mother but she doesn't talk about her. The little one doesn't understand yet. I want to make them happy. I tell them *you are beautifully created by God*. I wish I was an angel to look after everybody..." Maureen holds up a well-worn book that she reads daily, she says it gives her hope coincidentally the book is entitled *A message of Hope*.

Maureen is a strong independent woman. She doesn't want sympathy or handouts so when I ask her my final question, "if you were granted one wish to do anything on earth, what would it be?" I am surprised and humbled by her response "Just once, I want to go to a grocery store, take a trolley and fill it with all the groceries I want and not look at the price. Then when I get to the till I want someone to offer to pay for the whole trolley-load of groceries." It's as simple as that, how many of us find it a chore to collect a trolley at the entrance of the supermarket every week or month and fill it with whatever we need for our households, yet for Maureen, this is her greatest desire.

In conclusion, it may seem out of place for some readers that Maureen's story is under the heading "Success Stories" but in strange way, by its very existence, the HOPE Cape Town Outreach Project in Blikkiesdorp has impacted Maureen's life. Together, Maureen and HOPE Cape Town have become the heart and soul of the community - both are an inspiration to women and children. HOPE Cape Town sustains Maureen and her family through services such as the soup kitchen, the school readiness programme and the help of the social worker. Maureen provides the Walking Bus service for learners and encourages community safety, and isn't that what community service is all about?

20th Century author, Robert Collier said "Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day-in and day-out." Over the years, the institutional culture developed by HOPE Cape Town can be summed up in a single tag line ***Bridging the gap between Grassroots and Science***. Through the Blikkiesdorp Community Outreach Project and through phenomenal people like Maureen, we have learnt that by bridging the gaps and working closely together, day-in and day-out, we can help to improve people's lives and that's our combined story of success.

Marlene Whitehead
Donor Relations Manager
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