

Life after Rape

BY George Phillipas

'... too many rapists do not view their actions as wrong, too many girls are made to feel shame when they should only feel outrage, and too many people – neighbors, parents, colleagues, teachers – are standing by while this happens, encouraging rape with silence. Some even blaming the victim.'

TAC Campaigner (Treatment Action Campaign) – Mandla Majola

Rape is all too often not treated with the seriousness it deserves in South Africa and Africa in general. Given the high rates of rape, as high as 1 every 26 seconds in South Africa, tackling general attitudes is almost as important as providing the professional emergency follow-up treatment and long-term counselling that is essential for rape survivors.

Without the support of loved ones and surrounded by unsympathetic sentiments, many survivors sink into a deep sense of shame, depression and other mental conditions commonly known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or more specifically as Rape Trauma Syndrome. This psychological condition often becomes entrenched and affects every aspect of a survivor's daily life and becomes hard to escape in the long-term. By standing up tall in front of a camera and lights, survivors

were portrayed in a manner that conveyed them in a positive way where true beauty lies not on the surface but stems from deep inside those with the courage and strength to face their worst nightmares.

Each survivor was photographed at a location of personal significance and with an item or person that was singled out as having been the greatest source of strength during their long journey away from their appalling ordeal. This was anything or anyone, from their children, a counselor to a book of poems or religious artifacts symbolic of their strong faiths.

These images are aimed at raising community awareness and having a positive impact on this all-too-often hidden but rampant disease that has taken a cold grip on Africa as a whole. It is my hope that other survivors who have been too scared or ashamed to come forward will feel empowered by the stories of the women in this series and come forward.

Ruth

"I was too scared to tell anyone, especially my mother for fear that she would be furious with me"

I was raped by an older man who would follow me from school after sports practice when I was 13 years old. At first he kept his distance. He followed me regularly for a while and started to appear at school sports events and eventually in every aspect of my daily life. Every time he would get closer I would run. Then one evening, when I set off to the local shop, he caught up with me and dragged me into the bushes. I was raped then.

I was too scared to tell anyone, especially my mother for fear that she would be furious with me. I was also afraid that she might blame me for what had happened.

Following the ordeal, my behavior changed. What had happened stayed in the forefront of my thoughts everyday. It was not until later on in life I was able to begin the healing process and try to find some balance and peace again in my life.

My source of strength are these grounds around the Rape Crisis Centre in Somerset West in Cape Town where I now work. It is a tranquil place that sees so much pain. But if you get a chance to be here when it's empty, it's so peaceful.

I am encouraged by helping others overcome their own ordeal. One of the things that has contributed to my healing is the ability to work with people who have been through so much pain. I gain strength through listening and understanding what they have also been through. It is a humbling feeling.



Phumla

“At the age of thirteen, I fell pregnant and gave birth to a daughter”

I remember the great sense of excitement and expectation when my father sent for me to come and live with him at the age of nine. I had never really known him and had been living with my mother and extended family. It was not long before I realized he had other more sinister motives when I was subjected to continuous sexual abuse for almost four years. As a practicing sangoma (traditional African witch-doctor) he would often threaten to curse me if I spoke of my plight to anyone. At the age of thirteen, I fell pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. It was no longer possible to hide this terrible affair. I was abandoned by my mother and forced to live with my father's extended family who were physically and mentally abusive and dismissive towards me. Growing up was tough and lonely.

My father was eventually brought to justice and sentenced to life imprisonment. But this was a hollow victory for me. While prosecutors celebrated around me, I remembered feeling a great sense of emptiness and even guilt at having instigated the life-long incarceration of my own father. It is hard to challenge the child-father bond, even after such an extreme and sinister betrayal of paternal trust.

Over the years, I descended into a spiral of self-abuse. I now work at a top South African media company and have realistic aspirations of becoming a writer. I created 2 imaginary friends, a young African couple, who have been my amazing rock and source of strength. The couple have a healthy, robust and typically African relationship. The girl is always jealous and the man sometimes cheats on her but they are essentially in love.

I chose the training ground of Ajax Cape Town, a South African Premier League team as my source of strength. I have recently completed a screenplay revolving around football and life in the townships. I also have a great passion for the game itself. The headphones I hold represent the imaginary man I created, who is a station manager at a national radio station while the garment represents the imaginary girl's love of clothes and fashion. When I am frustrated, they give me hope.



Cindy

“Instead of protecting me, my mother became jealous”

I was raped by my stepfather from the age of ten and gave birth to 2 children out of the sexual abuse. The first child was born when I was fourteen years old. My stepfather forced me to lie and cover up for him by claiming that the father was a fictitious boyfriend who had absconded. After the second child was born, he finally owned up to my mother. Instead of protecting me, my mother became jealous of my supposed relationship with my stepfather and distanced herself from me. She considered me to be a love rival rather than a daughter who needed her urgent protection. Not once did she consider what had happened to be abuse and a terrible betrayal by a man in a position of paternal responsibility. It was my uncle who tried to help the situation. He insisted that we (my mother and I) leave my stepfather and encouraged me to bring criminal charges against him. The case collapsed after my mother returned to my stepfather and I was coerced into providing false testimony.

Growing up, I never really realized that my experience was out of the ordinary. I did however carry a lot of anger, sadness and loneliness throughout my life. I have difficulty making friends. Whenever someone would get close to me, they would become inquisitive about my situation. Their typical reaction (when finding out) would always be something like, 'Oh Wow! You were naughty!' Not once do they consider what had happened to me at such a young age to be rape.

In early 2009, I had a nervous breakdown. I feel it was my body telling me that it was time to deal with my emotions and history of abuse. I started going to counselling and group therapy sessions, which were very helpful. I can now speak openly about my trauma. I also find the welfare center where I work to be a great source of strength that allows me to escape my everyday worries. My female employer has also shown a lot of compassion and understanding towards the emotional challenges I am now confronting.

I still struggle with a lot of anger towards my mother for abandoning me. I am determined to confront her one day to ask why she allowed the abuse to continue for so long. Maybe for this reason, I desire most in life to be the best mother I can be.



Tessa

“A few days before my planned suicide date, I gave birth prematurely”

It was on one Friday afternoon in 2008. I was sharing a meal with my girlfriend in celebration of her birthday at her house in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town. We were attacked by a group of men. I only came to my senses three days later, cold, frail and numb in a forested area miles away from where I had been. Disorientated, I made my way back to my own home. It was only the next day, when I stripped to have a shower and saw the state of my body, that I suspected the worst. I was covered with bruises and my private parts were completely numb.

Not able to think clearly, I initially suspected that my girlfriend had even been involved in what might have been a sadistic prank. It was only later that I found out through a mutual friend that my partner had been raped and killed. When I finally plucked up the courage to go to a clinic to report what had happened, I received some shocking news. I she was pregnant.

I was in turmoil. I did not think I could cope with the idea of having a child borne out of murder and rape so I set a date to commit suicide.

A few days before my planned suicide date, I gave birth prematurely to my daughter two months before she was due. As soon as I saw her, I fell in love with her completely and unconditionally. I don't ever want to know who the father is. I don't want the killers to be found. [Because] if I found out and saw that father, I am scared that through anger I could end up killing my child.

I asked to be photographed at my local school where I hope to complete my studies, which I consider to be a symbol of hope for my future.

My daughter has been the greatest source of strength. I give all my love to her and she in return gives all her love to me.



Fumana

“I am a rape survivor and to me that means I am a powerful woman”

Beautiful and Wonderful Woman (A Poem by Fumana)

I am a rape survivor and to me that means I am a powerful woman. A beautiful and confident woman who survives this ordeal in life. He thought I would not survive.

He thought he had won.

He thought I was finished.

He took my virginity, my strength, my power, my love, but most importantly my dignity.

When he did that, he thought he had won - taken it all at the end of the day - all the strength, all the power, all the love and especially all the dignity.

But who am I to give myself up?

To give up my beauty?

Who am I to give up my power, my strength and my dignity.

I am a wonderful and powerful woman.

Women are like trees. They only need to find their strength.

A tree can lose its leaves, its branches and stems, but the thing about a tree is that its roots remain, where no-one can dig or reach. Because it is the roots that are the essential tool of life.

When the rainy season comes again, the roots absorb the water, the leaves begin to show again, the stems appear and the flowers blossom in beautiful colors and the tree shines again.

Wow! What a beautiful tree.

I see myself as that tree. I see a beautiful, wonderful, stronger woman who has her dignity again. That's me, myself and I.

I chose to be photographed by the beach where I rarely go, but always find comforting. It is a place that allows me to feel a great sense of inner peace. My book of poems and my creative outlet have been a source of strength for me over the years and I find that writing gives me a powerful release of built-up emotions.



Jeanine

“I am a rape survivor
and to me that means I
am a powerful woman”

A few months ago, if someone had said to me I would put all the pieces of my life back together, I would have said 'no way'. Now, I can see a way out.

I was raped while walking along my local beach. I was grabbed and dragged into the bushes by a man wielding a knife. During an appalling half hour ordeal the man threatened my life and on several occasions plunged the blade into the ground close to my face. I was left half-dressed and in a state of panic but managed to make my way to the local police station where I fell apart.

My family and boyfriend were very supportive but they could not help the way I felt inside. I had irrational feelings of guilt and shame and often wondered whether I shouldn't have been on the beach at the time of the attack. I worried about the effect it would have on my boyfriend, knowing that I had been violated by another man. We started having fights and my relationship eventually dissolved. My friends distanced themselves from me as I did from them. On both sides nobody really knew how to handle the situation. There is this assumption that because I have no physical scars, that I'm OK but that is just not the case. I had so many nightmares, panic attacks that will leave me shaking uncontrollably for months on end. I also had difficulty trusting my own judgement. I felt like an infant learning to do even the simplest tasks again.

Eventually the perpetrator was caught and tried in a South African criminal court. The court case was a nightmare. The system all too often doesn't afford a level of sensitivity required in rape cases. They treat rape cases like stolen bicycle cases. However, while sitting in the witness box and facing the perpetrator, I slowly found myself re-gaining my power for the first time since the ordeal. The man was found guilty and sentenced to 21 years, 12 without parole.

At first, I felt sorry for the perpetrator. I had been convinced during my ordeal that he was going to kill me and felt almost grateful that he hadn't. Recently though, I have begun to put the event in perspective and in so doing have begun to feel a lot of anger towards him and the violation he caused.

My counsellor and mother have been pillars of strength for me through this, but I do find the most comfort from my dog Hector and the unconditional love he gives me.

I chose to be photographed on the beach, not a 100 yards from where my terrible ordeal occurred. I refuse to allow the event to taint the beach that has brought me so much inner peace in the past.

