

My past cannot determine my future

Khomotjo Lekgoro

I was born on the 23 February 1991 in a small village called Ga-Nchabeleng. I am a first born to my mother and I have two siblings. I was raised by my 86 year old grandma. My grandma worked hard to put food on the table but I grew up in a family where there was no love.

I wanted to grow up with my mom and dad because my grandma was too old, but they were not there. My life was different from other girls. I had a lot of responsibilities. I had to look after my two siblings, make sure they eat, that their clothes are clean, and bath them before they go to school.

Happy moments

In 2006 I started dating. I fell in love with a boy though I didn't know anything about his life. I was in high school and all of my friends were dating. I was over the moon, because I was madly in love with him. My grandmother monitored all my moves. She could see I had started dating. I used to sneak out at night to see my boyfriend.

The problem started when my boyfriend said he wanted to have sex with me. At first I thought he was joking. But trust me he was serious. Remember I was staying with my grandma in the smallest village where we did not have access to lots of things. No one in my family had ever talked to me about sex. I did not know much about contraceptives and the risks of having sex. I had little information

about these kinds of things because even our teachers were not open enough to talk to us about sex.

Life orientation

One day our life orientation teacher gave us an assignment about 'What is HIV?' We were supposed to research about HIV and AIDS. One of our group suggested we go to the clinic for information. It was a very cold day—they call it BMW day – baby making weather day. We went to the clinic – five girls in our blue and white uniforms.

The woman at the clinic asked if we were there for contraceptives. We looked at each other and then answered 'no we are here for an assignment'. She said she was very busy and did not have time to play, then walked past us to go out for lunch. We decided to go inside without her permission.

We found posters about HIV, AIDS and contraceptives. We did our assignment and the funny part is that we got the highest marks.

Why not

All of my friends had tried it before, so it was only me who had never had sex. One night it was dark and everybody was sleeping. All I could hear was the sounds of birds whispering. I thought to myself I won't let any boy have sex with me, no matter how much I love him. I am not ready to have sex at this age. I am still young to have sex. That is what I told myself that day.

Breaking my virginity

My friend told me everything about breaking her virginity. She said she was with her boyfriend at home. She was staying alone at home because her mom was a teacher at another place. You can

imagine the freedom she had. She said she had fun. She did not say anything about pain.

As the months passed that thing of wanting to try was always in my mind, but I told myself I don't want to fall pregnant. Who was going to look after my baby while I am at school because my mom was not even staying with us.

One day my boyfriend called. I was alone in my grandma's sitting room. It was 8 o'clock but everyone was already sleeping. He said he was waiting for me outside. I did not waste time. I brushed my teeth, I brushed my hair, I put lotion all over my body. I smelt like I had just finished bathing. I checked that my grandma was sleeping and I went out quietly so I would not wake everyone.

I went to the corner where we always met. I did not care who was staring at me or who was saying what behind my back. The boy was from a wealthy family. He always used his mom's car to come and see me and I enjoyed it because no one in my family has a car. It was dark outside. All you could hear was Maribishi in the mountain and the sounds of dogs. I walked to the car and got in with a big smile, trying to impress him. We talked for a few minutes then he said 'Lets go somewhere different. We always park here and people from the neighbourhood are starting to stare at us'. I agreed.

He drove and parked near the river. It was very quiet. All you could see were these small trees and animals from the mountain. I did not mind because we were in the car. I knew he wanted something, but I was not sure if he really wanted to have sex with me. He started touching me all over my body and kissed me. I tried to stop him but he was already all over my body and before I knew it my clothes were under the car seat. He pushed very hard. I tried to stop him. I tried telling him I am not ready for sex. But he would not listen. All I could feel was the pain. But he was enjoying it. While he was busy many things crossed my mind. What if I fell pregnant?

What if I catch diseases like HIV and STI's? I tried to push him but he would not stop until he finished. I looked at him and he looked at me. He did not even ask how I felt.

He put his clothes on and he gave me mine. His mom called and said she wanted her car now. He did not even talk to me. He drove and dropped me at my home. It was almost one o'clock in the morning. Everyone in the neighbourhood was sleeping. I had big questions in my mind. What IF?

Ending the relationship

As the days went by my conscience was eating me. I told the guy I need to go to the doctor. He did not even ask why. He just gave me R 250 to go to the doctor. I went on a week day when everyone was at school or work so no one would recognise me. As I sat waiting for the doctor I wondered what I was going to do; what would I say to the doctor? I was busy cleaning the chair I sat on with the palm of my hand thinking what if I am pregnant? What if I have a STI? What will people say if they see me because I do not even look like I am sick?

When I got to the doctor's room I told him 'I think I am pregnant'. He did a scan and took a urine sample and then he told me I am not pregnant. He gave me counselling on HIV and the risks of unprotected sex.

That day I told myself from now on I just want to focus on my books, but we did not stop dating. I was doing matric and the guy was in grade 10. I told myself I love him but I will never let him stand in my way and disturb my studies. He did not care for my studies and he wanted to see my life miserable. I could not see that at first, but when time went by I sat alone in my room and told myself I want to end this relationship because I was not taking my studies seriously.

I did not even know there were other young girls he was seeing while he was dating me. He even impregnated one. I tried to fool myself that maybe it was just a mistake, that he loved me, but I was wrong. Finally I came to my senses and ended that relationship.

Sad times again

The same year my uncle decided to move from Joburg to stay with us permanently at home. By that time I was doing my matric. I was always sad and blaming myself for all the things that were going on in my life. My uncle was mentally ill. I remember one day he came to my school wearing a dress and everyone laughed at me. I felt so bad, I even lost my self-esteem.

My uncle was so abusive, he used to smoke *lebake* (marijuana). My sister and I knew we were his target whenever he was high. I remember one day I was sitting with my sister in the sitting room, trying to do homework. My uncle walked in and switched off the lights. When we asked why, he started punching us on our faces. I remember one day he punched my little sister on the face. She was bleeding but we didn't go to the police station to report him.

I started to date different boys. I thought maybe they will give me all the support I wanted. But I guess I was wrong. All they wanted was to have sex with me. I managed to move on with my life because at least they did not leave me with a mark. Unlike my uncle. My uncle left me with a mark on my face and my sister with a mark on her mouth. The funny part was that we even made jokes about our marks when we were happy. Unfortunately my uncle passed. It was very painful but I felt relieved.

Regardless of the situation we were in, I told myself if you keep God inside your heart there is nothing that will come into your life that you won't be able to handle.

I did not have time to study for matric. Things were very tough for me. There was nobody around to guide me or to give me advice. I had big dreams and I told myself one day I will reach my dreams.

New life and freedom

I passed my matric, not with flying colours, but my results were just good enough to enter university. Although I asked myself who was going to look after my siblings, what I wanted was to come to Johannesburg no matter what.

It was 2009. I packed my bags two days before leaving. I left on a Sunday morning. I woke early, the sun was already shining and everyone was preparing to go to church.

I went early to the bus station as I did not want to miss the bus. I waited an hour and 30 mins before the bus arrived.

The trip was very long – you can imagine from Limpopo to Johannesburg. I sat by the window and looked out. We passed different mountains, not to mention our biggest river Lepelle, we passed other buses and the biggest green trees. From Johannesburg I took another bus to Alex and arrived at 5pm.

I was going to stay with my mom. My mind was filled with excitement of leaving a rural village and coming to the city. It did not even cross my mind that I would be living in the smallest shack. I was over the moon—I don't know how to explain that feeling. I got to my mom's shack. We did not talk much. My mom and I were not close. I did not want to talk much because I was tired, and she was not open enough to talk to me. Coming here was my decision. No one had sat down to talk to me about my plans for that year. They all knew my aim—I wanted to go to school.

The next day I told my mom I was planning to go to study in Pretoria and that I had applied at Tshwane University of

Technology. My mom gave me money to go and look for a space at TUT. I spent two weeks going there but I did not get a space for that year, and they asked me to come back the following year.

My friend Elmond who was already studying at TUT advised me to go to college and come back the following year. I did not mind what course I took, all I wanted was to go to school. Elmond took me to different colleges to enquire about their courses. Remember it was my first time in town, seeing those big buildings like the ABSA Building was the biggest challenge of my life.

I enrolled with PC Training to study Human Resources. The question now was where I was going to stay, because my mom could afford accommodation in town. I went back to Alex to ask my mom if she could afford the fees for the college, and if yes where was I going to stay. She said she would pay the fees and she suggested that I stay with my father. I had never heard of my father, but I knew he was still alive.

I registered at the college and packed my bags to go to Mamelodi to stay with my father. That night I did not sleep. I was busy staring at the rats, busily going up and down my mom's shack. Wondering about tomorrow's trip. I was the first to wake the next morning. I took a bath in the smallest bowl, brushed my teeth and wore my favourite clothes. You wouldn't even say I was from that small shack.

Me and my mom we took a taxi to Pretoria. We were silent as if we were going to a funeral. We got out of the taxi and took another taxi to Mamelodi. I thought maybe I am going to stay in a house for a change. But I got the same thing. A shack. The difference was this one was painted blue. We slept there that night. The following day my mom went back to Alex.

Monday I was supposed to go to school but I did not even have money for a taxi. I said to my so called dad 'I am about to leave'. He

asked 'do you have money for taxi?' I said 'no'. He gave me R20 to cover a taxi to college and back. I got lost on the way but finally I got the right place.

I attended college and started making new friends. I am the kind of person who can bath nicely and wear my last beautiful clothing- you can't even tell I wake up in a shack. My friends always wanted to visit me but I was embarrassed to let them see where I was living.

I was adjusting very well to the big city. I even made some sleep overs at my friend's place. She was very sweet. She did not mind buying me food for the whole weekend as she was from a wealthy family.

We used to party a lot. Remember it was my time of experiencing those kinds of things like partying the whole night, drinking alcohol. I mean life was great. As the year went by I managed to pass my course and I got my certificate in Human Resources.

Exciting moment

It was 2010 when I got space to study at the Tshwane University of Technology. 2010, the year of the FIFA World Cup. Studying at TUT was the biggest thing that had ever happened in my life. I had a friend who organised everything for me. It was easy for him as he was already in his final year and he was a member of the SRC.

I got financial aid to pay for my fees, accommodation and food. I remember as if it was yesterday. I was carrying my bags to res, accompanied by my friend to res. When I got there I saw these big buildings with no paint, big trees, and lots of cars in the parking lot. In the foyer were beautiful paintings and posters, red and white paint around them. Wow! Everything was so on point! People were friendly. A girl called Koketso came up to us with a big smile and

asked 'how can I help you guys'. My friend showed her my approval letter and she said we can follow her.

Wow! I can still remember the excitement as we went up the stairs to the third floor. Koketso opened a door and said 'this is your room.' I couldn't believe it. It was a big room painted white. There was a wardrobe and a basin. The toilet and the TV room were next door. I thought I was dreaming. I forgot all my problems and worries. Remember I had never had my own room before. I was also the first person from my family to go to university. Can you imagine the expectation from my entire family?

Facing new challenges, finding new hope

Life was so great. I even forgot where I came from and the reason why I was there. I didn't care about my studies. I spent three years there without making any progress. All I ever wanted was to go out and party and drink alcohol with friends. All I wanted was to go out and have fun with different kinds of men. Sometimes I drank so much I forgot everything. I would wake the next morning with a lot of questions about what really happened last night. I had a boyfriend who loved me but he was so sweet I could twist his head whenever I wanted to go out with other men.

Then in March 2012 I fell pregnant. I did not want to tell anyone. This was my second pregnancy because I had an abortion before this. During my first month of pregnancy I wanted to kill myself but one of my friends advised me to go for counselling. I went for counselling so I could be prepared to become a parent.

I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Things were difficult because my boyfriend was not working. I went to stay with my aunt but it was not easy. My aunt helped me with the baby, but she expected me to do other home chores. When my baby was two months old

I decided to go back to Pretoria where my boyfriend was renting a room.

It was hard as we were both not working. As a year went by I decided that without education I am nothing. I told myself I will never waste any time of my life again. I got the chance to go back to varsity and finish my studies and I am now back on track studying hard to make sure I achieve this.

Learning to accept myself

I did a lot of things I am not proud of. For a long time I was always angry at myself. The abortion is something I am not proud of, trust me. I had never told anyone about this until now as I wrote my story. It was very hard to accept myself for who I am, but coming to Phutaditjaba Community Centre in Alexander was the best decision ever. I was able to make peace with myself. I have learnt to love and appreciate myself and to accept and forgive all the people who wronged me. Now I have peace and I know that I am a unique, kind and powerful woman.

