



Zambia Impact Story

Volunteer Experience: On The Street by John Parsons

'Sorry I'm late,' said Vasco, the head of the Footprints Foundation for Children in Zambia.

Vasco had been up all night calming an explosive situation with street-children. He was summoned by a government official as he is respected by both the government and the street-children.

Vasco is a well-built man of medium height, forty-something, with an infectious smile. He was recounting his story outside of the cottage I shared with two colleagues on a large parkland estate in Lusaka, under a flowering chinaberry tree.

Every ten years the government takes a national census and on this night they sent two civil servants to check the number of rough sleepers in the city. In one location the street-children thought it was a prelude to a police raid and stoned the census-takers.

Vasco had calmed the situation and now, after a few hours shut-eye, he and his two colleagues, Moses and Aggie, were ready to lead a team of volunteers from the UK to central Lusaka, to the base of Bridge No 2. The bridge spans four railway lines leading to a marshalling yard, and is near a pedestrian trade route with a high crime rate. Armed para-military police frequently patrol the area.

Our team was to build relationships with a gang of young people and have some meaningful input into their lives. Vasco forbade anyone to carry a mobile or camera, and watches were to be pocketed. 'Don't give the impression of wealth,' he said. Our project team leaders would hold board games, art materials, and a tennis ball.

I asked Vasco what brought young people onto the streets? 'The reasons are varied and complex,' he explained, matter-of-factly. 'Some fled physical or sexual abuse, others were double-orphaned by the loss of both parents, as I was. Maybe their family didn't have sufficient resources for food, and a minority found the discipline of home life too harsh.'

During the day a few kids wash cars or run errands, earning loose change with which to buy 'stika', which is a toxic by-product of jet fuel. This inhalant drug is taken in two forms, either by sniffing from a bottle, or a rag. It blocks feelings of hunger, the chaos of shattered lives. and the cold at night (Lusaka is almost as high as Ben Nevis).

The team's minibus was parked in central Lusaka from where Vasco led the team along a walkway strewn with rubbish, and across four railway lines to the concrete abutment of Bridge No 2, which was covered with graffiti. A strong smell of glue hung in the air. This was an alien world, one for which I was ill-prepared.

Under the bridge's overhang were some thirty youngsters, aged from ten to twenty-five, unwashed, clad in rags. Coke bottles filled with stika were propped inside their trouser belts. It made my flesh creep.

One guy was lying on a car tyre, seemingly in cloud-cuckoo-land. Others stood around aimlessly, chatting or engaging in horse-play. Some older lads with sullen faces and suspicious eyes moved away, perhaps thinking our team was in league with the police. They frequently carry out raids, batons raised.

I expected to be rebuffed by the youngsters. To my surprise those in their early teens were happy to chat, and enjoy the attention.

Between the railway lines and a row of buildings was a tract of waste ground, ankle deep in wind-blown dust. Not the ideal place for games but there was no alternative. Our leader handed me a tennis ball which I threw to a colleague. Now the action was about to begin. A boy wearing a thick red woollen hat, a dirty light blue wind-cheater and odd trainers joined in, throwing the ball high into the air. He was joined by another youth whose hair was the colour of straw, long battleship-grey trousers rolled to the knee, and bare-footed.

The game went well for nearly an hour. As one youngster retired, another took his place. In time the blinding sun forced me to find some shade.

Sitting on a plank bench was a girl who should have been at high school. She had challenged one of my colleagues to a game of draughts, changing the rules with every move. She wiped the board with him.

A team member from Staffordshire was entertaining the kids with an art class. Her pupils were drawing, or colouring abstract patterns. Their concentration was intense. She asked if anyone wanted a sticker. With one voice everyone shouted, 'Me Miss.' They thought drugs were on offer.

Nearby was a teenager who had attracted a crowd. He was tall, well-built, wearing a purple singlet with the words 'CARTER 15' on the front. He was known as Sky Boy. The air was full of anticipation and excitement as he started to give an impromptu performance of rap music, focusing on the injustices of life. The other kids were clapping and shuffling their feet to the rhythm, smiles on their faces. His body language, lyrics and phrasing, were out of this world.

When Sky Boy had finished and the applause had faded a team leader asked why a talented guy was on the streets. 'Violence at home,' he said. 'My step-father thought I was a threat to his relationship.'

'That happened to me, too' shouted a guy wearing a straw hat that had seen better days.

Sky Boy continued. 'Once I was taken to a studio to play with professionals. At first it went well. Then they stole my songs.'

Passers-by stopped to watch the team interacting with the unkempt youngsters. Then an amazing thing happened. A woman dressed in a bold-patterned wraparound garment and a tan-coloured African turban, came along with a white plastic bucket filled with ice lollies. She distributed them to everyone, including our team. When mine slipped to the ground a youngster handed me a replacement. Everyone was smiling.

Two hours passed. Escorted by the street-children, we headed back to our minibus. The morning had been successful in building relationships, bringing a little stability into disordered lives, showing care, and compassion.

As the minibus manoeuvred its way through traffic Vasco looked over his shoulder. 'Never give up on these kids,' he said. 'We wait six years before some do decide to turn their lives around. Footprints focuses on re-integrating street-children with their families.'

'Now for a story,' Vasco went on, waiting for everyone's attention. 'One day I saw a lad who was better dressed than the rest. I felt drawn to him. The boy said in a soft voice, ' "I don't like it here. I want to go home. My friends made me come. They thought it would be more exciting than life in our village." '

The minibus stopped at road lights. Two men, live geese under each arm, walked the traffic lanes looking for a sale. 'No thanks,' Vasco said, and continued his story.

'Footprints bought the lad's bus ticket. It was a matter of urgency. If he stayed another night he may have taken Stika, and got hooked. I was the right person in the right place at the right time. Divine providence, I reckon.' There were murmurs of assent. 'When the boy reached home his family was overwhelmed with joy. They had gone to the mortuary, thinking their son dead.'

'My God, what an ordeal,' a voice gasped.

I learnt that Vasco himself was an orphan at eight years of age. He was befriended by an older boy who taught him how to survive on the streets. In time he washed cars for government ministers, built relationships, and trust.

Vasco's life had a paradigm shift when he was taken to the Fountain of Hope, a children's home. The years passed and the leaders recognised his potential. He understood life on the streets, and also importantly related well to kids.

Now a grown man, Vasco met a British woman with a heart for street-children. In 2012 they formed the Footprints Foundation for Children in Zambia which is registered as a charity both in Zambia and the UK. The work has brought many frustrations but also mind-blowing stories of reintegration, and success, as I discovered two days later in the Missisi shanty town. Our team called on a woman living in a cement block shack who had re-integrated into traditional Zambian life. Now she had a steady partner and a delightful gurgling baby. She was so excited at having foreign visitors that she couldn't keep still, jumping up and down saying, 'Please look inside my house.'

Vasco is an inspirational character - a good role model for street-children. His wise words and magnetic personality has had a lasting effect on many lives. Even so, I have a feeling his full potential has yet to be unlocked.

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