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**JOZI BOOK FAIR 2025**

**#Batjha Kaofela**

**Rebuilding Communities, Rebuilding Friendships**

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## **Jozi Book Fair**

**A Book presented to:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

School/Organisation \_\_\_\_\_

Let us build a culture of reading & writing in all our languages

Presented By:

Dr Maria Van Driel

Khanya College Director

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### **Introduction**

This year *Batjha Kaofela* (Our Youth) celebrates its 10th anniversary, a special milestone for the Jozi Book Fair (JBF) and Khanya College. *Batjha Kaofela* is an anthology of short stories written by high school youth who work with the JBF on an ongoing basis. The aim of *Batjha Kaofela* is to create a space for school youth to write, dream, and share their stories with honesty, imagination, and courage. *Batjha Kaofela* responds to the need for books and literature in all South Africa's languages, in a context where libraries are few at schools and in communities; and where books are expensive and unaffordable.

This year's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Batjha Kaofela* is celebrated well, with a record number of 201 stories received from township youth, an increase of 67% from the 120 stories received in 2024.

The theme of JBF 2025, *Rebuilding Communities and Friendship*, captures both the spirit of this anniversary and the broader journey of healing, connection, and renewal that young people are seeking in their schools, homes, and communities in a context of poverty, unemployment and social inequality. The ongoing work throughout the year, reading and writing in study groups, also contributes to building solidarity between township youth.

The stories in this year's anthology explore what it means to break apart and rebuild, from mending friendships broken by distance, to finding strength after loss, and rediscovering trust in fractured homes and communities. Many of the young writers confront difficult realities, including mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and feelings of isolation. These issues are often compounded by violence, bullying, family struggles, and unemployment. The stories highlight how mental health can affect every aspect of a young person's life, from their school performance and friendships, to their sense of self-worth and future aspirations.

Through their words, the writers share the quiet struggles of living with various challenges in environments that may lack support. They confront the fear of being misunderstood or judged, and show the courage it takes to speak out. The anthology celebrates resilience: young people find ways to cope, seek connection, and nurture hope even in the face of adversity. In doing so, they remind us that protecting and maintaining mental well-being is essential to rebuilding individual lives and entire communities.

This collection also represents the Jozi Book Fair (JBF) Tsohang Batjha (Arise Youth) project which organises youth at school to read and the write. As the JBF celebrates a decade of nurturing young writers, this anthology reflects the rebuilding of the partnership with schools. Before Covid 19 Khanya College worked with 60

schools, and we are slowly rebuilding. These voices remind us that schools remain important spaces for learning, creativity, and emotional growth. At the same time, the limited representation of participants in this year's anthology from the Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Centres (OVCs), highlights the severe impact of budget cuts and staffing shortages on these vital community spaces. The OVCs also provide psychosocial support to youth, that is often scarce. The absence of the OVCs' participation in this edition is deeply felt, and there is an urgent need to rebuild OVCs and community programmes that provide care, safety and creative spaces for children and youth.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the coordinators at the OVCs, teachers, and moderators who supported this process.

Thanks to the young writers who trusted us with their stories, and giving us hope for the future.

A special thanks to all those who submitted stories but whose work was not chosen for publication this year. We encourage not to give up, keep writing!

Best wishes

The Jozi Book Fair Team

9 October 2025

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### **A Note from the Moderators**

Congratulations to every one of the young writers who entered this year's competition. Even if your entry has not made it into the anthology, you are still a winner, simply for sitting down and writing a story. Writing offers fulfilment in so many ways, from the simple joy of sharing our ideas and entertaining others, to making sense of whatever may perplex or trouble us, and it is equally a gift to our readers who may need the escape of a good story or the reassurance that they are not alone. We encourage you to make writing a regular part of your lives.

This year saw a high number of entries, and we immediately observed a higher standard of writing than in previous years. We also noticed an increasing variety of genres- a healthy sign. The writers displayed creativity and cleverness in linking their stories to this year's theme *Rebuilding Communities, Rebuilding Friendships*. There was an emphasis on forgiveness as well as understanding and tolerance.

Moderating proved to be an enjoyable if challenging task, and we believe that the future of South African literature is in good hands as the competition has revealed some shining writing talent.

Thank you to Khanya College and the Jozi Book Fair for giving our youth this annual opportunity to express themselves. We hope the competition will continue.

**- the moderators: Jayne Bauling, Neilwe Mashigo & Susan April**

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## **BATJHA KAOFELA 2025 TOP 10 WINNERS**

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## **Am I the Problem?**

**by Abigail Teketse**

**Grade 11, Centurion College**

The bathroom mirror stared back at me, unforgiving under the harsh fluorescent light. I adjusted my school uniform, tugging at the collar as if it would somehow fix the way I looked. But it still felt wrong, like no matter what I wore, I'd never look the way they wanted.

"Stand still." Voices echoed in my head. "Fix your dress. You're doing too much."

I tried to smooth my hair, but the words stuck with me like glue. "I don't like your hair. Your skirt is too short. Don't be dramatic."

It was like a playlist on repeat, the same criticisms playing over and over. And each time I asked myself: Am I the problem?

If I were prettier, quieter, smarter—perfect—would they finally stop worrying about me? Would they stop fighting with me? Would they finally... like me? And more importantly, would I finally like myself?

I whispered a quick prayer, though my throat was tight. God, help me. Please. But the silence that followed was deafening.

Dad dropped me off at school, his radio humming faintly in the background. I stared out the window, pretending to watch the trees blur past, but really, I was bracing myself for another day of pretending.

At school, my friends laughed as we walked through the corridors, but their voices felt far away. When someone asked if I was okay, I answered with my usual: "I'm fine." But somehow those two words had become code for: "I can't do this anymore."

The thoughts I tried to bury clawed their way back every night. Lying in bed, I felt like a balloon stretched thin. Every little bit of stress, every mean comment, every moment of loneliness was air being blown into me. I was waiting for the pop.

By the third period, the pressure was suffocating. I sat in front of the computer in CAT, the screen glowing far too bright, words and icons blurring together. The clicking of keyboards filled the room, steady like a heartbeat, but mine felt too fast. The teacher's voice floated over us, explaining the task, yet it slipped past me like static. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, frozen. Nothing made sense. All I could think was, I want to feel good enough. I want to look in the mirror and not hate what I see.

But I was fading. Even sleep felt heavy, like it was dragging me further down instead of lifting me up.

During break, my friends and I stayed in the classroom. They chatted about TikToks and music, their laughter bouncing off the walls. I sat at my desk, scrolling on my phone, pretending to listen, pretending to laugh at the right times. But inside, I was screaming. I wanted someone—anyone—to notice the cracks in my smile, the way my mask was slipping.

When one of them nudged me and said, "You're so quiet today," I forced out a laugh. "Just tired." Always tired. That excuse was easier than the truth.

The truth was, I didn't know how long I could keep pretending. How long before I exploded? How long before I wasn't just invisible inside, but completely gone?

At the end of the day, I slowed my steps as I walked toward the gate where Dad was waiting. My schoolbag felt heavier than usual, though I knew it wasn't the books.

I looked up at the sky—soft clouds drifting lazily, untouched by pressure, free.

And for a second, I wondered: Would anyone notice if I disappeared?

The thought scared me, but it was there, lingering like a shadow I couldn't shake.

I hugged myself tighter, whispering into the air, "Please, God. Don't let me be the problem."

## **Does Anyone Understand Me?**

**by Haley Percent**

**Grade 9, PUSH**

Sometimes I wonder what purpose I serve in life. There is so much to life. You need to figure out ways to survive. And I wonder, have I even found a way to survive? When I think on it, it is so complex, I feel like I don't know what to do or what I am doing. Like I want to do something, but then what if it is not the right thing to do? I know I should be optimistic and keep positive, but it's hard knowing that deep down inside something is bothering you. But then you just have to suck it up and put a smile on your face, hoping that situation would disappear somehow, but it does not. Hoping that every day will be better than the last one.

It is exhausting having this positive spirit when you are constantly surrounded by negativity. Sometimes I question those who are successful; how did they manage to get where they are?

I have the same vision, but it feels like I'm stuck in the middle of the ocean, struggling to move forward with the same passion, hoping to make a positive impact in life just as they did, but it is difficult.

Life has a tendency to repeat itself, kind of like a cycle, repeating itself over and over again. Just living a life repeating itself over and over again makes me feel like I'm going insane. For me life as a teenager is confusing because so much is expected from you and you don't want to let anybody down. You at least try to be your best for everyone, for yourself included. Trying to fit in and making sure that everyone is satisfied with what you have to offer knowing that it might not be enough, but you do it anyway. And you tell yourself it is okay, even if you do not get what you deserve.

You just have to accept it and know that it is life, and that you have to adapt to it, no matter how hard or uncomfortable it may seem. Yes, there may be changes, a lot of changes. Certain things and certain people in your life may change as well, and you have to adapt to it.

And then I wonder: does my life even make sense, the way I do things or the way I understand certain things? If only someone was able to understand me completely, because I'm able to understand someone else completely. Would someone do the same for me as I do for them? Sometimes I wonder if I'm strong or clever enough to fight the battle, I question myself so much not realizing that other people go through more than I go through. I should just be grateful for what I have been blessed with. It's not easy to just think that

other people are going through way more than I am. How do I handle it? So much is happening and you don't know what to do, you don't always believe that you can do it because you doubt yourself, and you don't know what to expect.

And you try to change your mindset and look at it differently. You are constantly pushing yourself to be better, to do things better or the right way. I just hope that I make sense to someone, and that they will be willing to do for me as I for them. I hope that I will change and be optimistic. That I will help others without expecting anything in return, and figure out a way to live life without any complaining or confusion from anyone. For it to be easy to understand me. For someone to tell me I make sense, but even if nobody tells me, I won't give up trying to make a difference.

Trying to show people that I can reach the top and will try my best to be positive, and motivate or encourage people to do the right thing. I mean doing the right thing would not hurt anyone. I know it is not going to be easy, but it is worth the try. There is no time to just sit there and not do anything. But easy does it, taking it step by step. I hope that this will encourage someone, and that I do make sense to someone in this world.

**A Cranked Voice**  
**by Ishumael Kumwenda**  
**Grade 8, New Model Private College**

Alex had always loved singing. As a child, he'd belt out his favourite tunes in the shower, much to his mother's delight. She'd smile and join in, their voices harmonising in perfect sync. When Alex's school started a choir, his mother encouraged him to join. She'd attend every performance, beaming with pride as Alex's confidence grew.

At home, she'd help him practice, sitting patiently as he ran through scales and exercises. "You're a natural, sweetie" she'd say, offering words of encouragement when he struggled. Alex's passion deepened and his mother was his biggest support.

However not everyone shared her enthusiasm. Alex's father, a practical man with a no-nonsense approach to life, saw singing as a hobby, not a career. "You'll never make a living doing that", he'd say, dismissing Alex's dreams of becoming a professional singer. "Why don't

you focus on being something more practical, like a businessman or an engineer?" he'd suggest, comparing singing unfavourably to more 'respectable' pursuit.

Despite his father's disapproval, Alex continued to pursue his passion. He worked hard, honing his craft and earning a spot as lead singer in his school choir. His father's disdain only grew. "You are wasting your time with this singing nonsense", he'd say, belittling Alex's passion and making him feel like he was foolish to pursue his dreams.

One day, Alex's teacher asked him to lead the choir performance. Alex was excited and overjoyed, feeling like his hard work was paying off. When he got home, he couldn't wait to share the good news with his parents. "Mom, dad, I have some amazing news", he exclaimed, his eyes shining with excitement. "My teacher asked me to lead the choir performance, and she says I am really good".

His mother smiled, her eyes sparkling with pride, "That's wonderful, sweetie! I'm so proud of you". His father however grunted, his expression, disapproving. "That's nice, Alex, but let's not get too carried away. You still need to focus on your studies and find a real career". Sitting down for dinner Alex's father handed him a glass of water. "Drink up, son, you must be thirsty after a long day of singing." Unbeknown to Alex, the water contained a medicine that would change everything.

After he drank the water with medicine, Alex didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. During the next choir practice, he realised that his voice wasn't working like it used to. He strained to hit the high notes, but they all came out flat. The choir teacher noticed the change in Alex's voice and expressed concern. She approached him after practice and recommended that Alex see a doctor to figure out what was going on.

Alex didn't think much of it, but he decided to mention it to his mother that evening. "Mom, my choir teacher thinks I should see a doctor about my voice", he said, trying to downplay the situation. His mother took it seriously. "Let's schedule an appointment right away", she said, her expression filled with worry. The doctor's office was a blur of nervous chatter and sterile smells. Alex's mother held his hand tightly as they waited for the doctor to come in. The doctor's words would change everything.

"Alex, the tests show that your vocal cords have been severely damaged," the doctor said gently. "It's unlikely that you will ever sing again". Hearing this, Alex felt like he'd been punched in the gut; he looked at his mother, seeing the shock and sadness reflected in her eyes. "What... what happened?" he stammered.

The doctor hesitated before answering. "It looks like you had taken a vocal suppressant pill, designed to ruin your singing voice. It's unlikely your voice can be restored", the doctor concluded. Alex's world came crashing down around him. He thought of his father and a wave of realization washed over him. "The water... It wasn't just water." Tears streamed down his face as he realised the truth.

Months went by and Alex struggled to come to terms with what had happened. He knew his father was responsible, but he couldn't bring himself to confront him; instead he bottled his emotions, pretending everything was fine, but it wasn't fine. Alex wasn't the same happy, carefree person he used to be. He was now consumed by sadness and stress, his eyes sunken and his smile a rare sight.

His mother noticed the change in him and tried to be supportive, but she couldn't penetrate the darkness that had settled around him. One day, as Alex sat on the couch, staring blankly at the TV, his mother sat down beside him and wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulders. "Alex, I have been working on something", she said softly. "I know things have been tough, but I think I might have some good news.

Alex looked at her skeptically, but his mother's smile was infectious. "What is it?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "I found a record label that has a vocal specialist who might be able to help you restore your voice," she said, her eyes shining with hope. Alex's heart skipped a beat. Could it be true? Could he really get his voice back? A spark of hope ignited within him, and for the first time in months, he felt a glimmer of optimism.

"What do we do now?" he asked, his voice a little stronger now. His mother smiled. "We'll schedule an appointment and see what the specialist has to say. It's a long shot, but it's worth a try."

The next day Alex and his mother met with the specialist, and he agreed to restore Alex's voice, but in exchange Alex had to produce music for the record label. Alex was hesitant to agree to the deal, but his mother encouraged him and Alex agreed. Alex began his journey towards healing and recovery. With the support of his mother and the expertise of the specialist, Alex slowly started to regain his voice.

As he progressed, Alex discovered that his voice wasn't just about singing, but about expressing himself and connecting with others. He learned to appreciate the beauty of his own unique voice, even if it was different from what it used to be. With months of hard work and maximum effort Alex finally regained his voice.

Seeing that he had regained his voice, Alex's mother burst into tears of joy. Her son was happy, and he was himself again. Alex remembered the deal he had made with the record label, and he worked tirelessly on a song that he had been writing. With his mother's help he finished the song. The record label was impressed by Alex's talent; they decided to produce his song and it was a huge hit. People couldn't get enough of the catchy beat and powerful vocals.

Meanwhile, Alex's father who had always disapproved of his son's music, found himself tapping his feet to the tune without realizing it was Alex's song. He was proud of the singer, but he had no idea it was his own son. That all changed when Alex performed on TV. His

father's jaw dropped as he watched his son shine on stage, belting out the lyrics to his hit song. A mix of emotions swirled inside him, pride, surprise, and regret for not supporting Alex's passion. Alex's father quickly drove to Alex's concert to see his son perform.

After the performance Alex's father approached him, his eyes shining with tears. "Alex, I'm so sorry", he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "I'm sorry for taking away your voice, for not believing in you when you needed me the most. Can you ever forgive me son?"

Alex looked at his father, seeing genuine remorse in his eyes. "Dad, I forgive you", he said, his voice filled with emotion. "You may have taken away my voice, but you couldn't take away my passion for music, and in the end, it made me stronger and more determined to succeed, and it made our bond stronger".

Their conversation was interrupted by the cheers of the crowd, but Alex's father held him tight, feeling a sense of pride and love he'd never felt before. "I'm so proud of you son", he repeated his voice filled with emotion.

From that day on, Alex's father became his biggest fan, attending all his concerts and cheering him on. Alex's mother smiled, knowing that her son's journey had brought the family closer.

As Alex looked at the sea of adoring fans, he realised that his father's initial disapproval had ultimately led him to find his true voice and purpose. He was grateful for the struggles he'd faced, as they'd made him stronger and more determined to succeed.

With his family by his side, Alex took the stage, his voice soaring as he sang from the heart. The crowd erupted in applause and Alex knew he'd found his true calling.

## **Discovery Eyes**

**by Keamogetso Malefi**

**Grade 10, Providence Academy**

If somebody in my community asked me, "Why are you gay?" I wouldn't be able to give them a proper answer or excuse that would satisfy them. Why was I like this? I had no idea. For the past seventeen years of my life, I have never felt comfortable in my own skin. It seems like when other people were born, they were already comfortable with their own skin and body being given whichever gender they belong to. I was born male, being given the name Felix and having my pronouns decided for me, being he and him, as if to say there was nothing beyond me. What if I'm okay with that, what if I feel like "he", but I don't display the masculine personality a male is meant to have? Of course, these were thoughts I kept to myself. I had never dreamt of telling my family the real truth of who I truly was, because my physical state and information were enough to convince people of my gender and what was I

meant to be. Coming from a very religious family of God-fearing Christians, my sexual orientation would only be seen as a sin. I would not tell my father; he would kick me out of the house for coming out of the closet. I thought of telling my four brothers but remembered how they got at me for my obvious feminine energy, as if it was not enough that they were my father's favourites for being so tough and manly, and loving anything that had to do with violence. I even contemplated telling Mbalentle, or Rosie as I called her. She was my stepmother; I tragically lost my biological mother to cancer. Rosie was the most understanding person in my entire life, but despite that I feared she would not understand.

As I walked into the chemistry class, I felt a surge of emotions running through me. This class has a memory that will forever be engraved in my mind. This was the class that made me. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2022, I walked into this class, the same set up, the same white walls with posters of chemical formulae and the periodic table of elements at the back of the room, the same nostalgic air of paint and ink. The only difference was that my table was occupied by someone at the same window seat which was my favourite side to sit. He was Lukhanyi, a new student, and he truly made my heart skip a beat the moment I laid eyes on him, and I'm guessing he felt the same because he seemed rather happy to have me as his desk partner, and we instantly hit it off. We were always together at school, and even after school, until we decided to take our relationship to the next level by dating without the knowledge of anybody, because we knew how closed-minded people could be in our community.

Sadly, he moved back to where he originally lived; that was the first time I ever truly felt heartbreak, and I could not confide in anyone. We eventually lost contact, and I have healed, finding comfort in music, but I still have days when I think about Lukhanyi even now in the present, and every time I walk into the chemistry class, I always stop for a good five minutes to think of him and our first encounter.

As we were learning, a girl walked in and grabbed everyone's attention. Mr Ndlovu introduced her as Monica. She was tall and had flawless brown skin, big kinky Afro hair, hazel eyes, and a smile brighter than the sun. She looked like Christmas morning. Everyone was immediately drawn to her. She was instructed to sit by me, and I was stunned by her beauty as she extended her hand and I shook it back. That was the first time I saw people envying me. She was so kind and funny, we instantly became close friends. Monica and I are total opposites, but I guess that's what made us great friends. Eventually I started noticing that Monica, doesn't like boys and that's when I found out that she is lesbian. At this point chemistry became my favourite class, because this is the place where I found people who understand me.

I instantly became more interested in Monica; she knew and understands herself, categorising herself as a fem. She was confident about her sexuality and paid no mind to what people had to say about her. I was inspired by Monica and wanted to learn from her. After school Monica invited me to a spoken word event two blocks away from my house. I fell in love with spoken word; it was peaceful and filled with self-expression. I listened to

various artists, each word cutting deeper into my heart, every melody leaving me in tears. I kept coming. I started joining in and a lot of people liked my work. I met amazing people who were more like me, and it felt good to know that I was not alone. I truly met someone who grabbed my attention when we met; his name was Owami and he was the most chilled person I had ever met. Days later, after finally feeling like I belong, I woke up to my father kicking my door down in anger, his veins popping out of and his eyes bloodshot, as he slapped me so hard I saw stars. Behind him, my brothers stood supporting him. I did not understand what was happening until Rosie came running in and stopped my father for almost killing me. In tears and confusion, I asked what I had done so wrong, and in a cold and disappointed voice Rosie told me that my secret of being gay was out to the whole world. That's when I found out that someone had leaked a video of me in spoken word where I was strongly emphasising that I was gay. The next couple of days at home were a nightmare, with my father and brothers calling me a disgrace to the family, and Rosie completely avoiding me all over the house. School wasn't any easier, with everybody looking at me weirdly or people giving me lectures on how I wouldn't go to heaven for choosing to be gay. I was truly depressed until Monica said she was tired of seeing me like that and she made me realise that there was no use in being depressed and feeling sorry for myself. Then she and I devised a plan.

Monica helped me to organise a spoken word event. You might be asking why I would organise the same thing that caused my downfall, but the reason I did was to be able to tell my part of the story and allow the words to sink into people and make them understand me. On the day of my spoken word event, I gave my poem in front of my community. I talked about everything that I had been struggling with, including my identity crisis, social anxiety and self-acceptance, and the journey I went through, from feeling like a nobody to actually feeling like a strong individual who could accept and love themselves. In passing I mentioned how my community could learn to accept and love their children regardless of their sexual orientation, and at the end, I got a standing ovation and people in the community started treating me with more respect. It felt good to know that I was accepted in my community, but the best part was how other people also had the confidence to come out.

**Unshattered Shackles**  
**by Khanyisile Ndlovu**  
**Grade 10, Pride Learning Academy**

It felt like I was trapped in a never-ending cycle, suffocating under the weight of colonial systems that had oppressed my people for centuries. The sound of my

ancestors' struggles still echoed in my head. I stood tall, staring at the broken pieces of a system that had held me back for so long. As a Black person, I had always dreamed of reclaiming my heritage and culture stolen by colonial powers. But every step I took was met with resistance, every door I tried to open was slammed shut. The legacy of colonialism had other plans for me.

I thought of my grandmother's stories about our ancestors' struggles and resilience. My parents had sacrificed a lot to support my passion for learning, enrolling me in a school that valued indigenous history, but the system was designed to keep me down, to erase my identity and silence my voice. It felt like I was fighting a losing battle, like I was screaming into a void. The words of my ancestors echoed in my mind: "We will not be silenced, we will not be erased." But the chains of colonialism seemed too strong, too deeply ingrained.

As I navigated the complexities of my identity, I realised that my spirituality was the key to unlocking my true freedom. Without reconnecting with my indigenous beliefs and practices, I was still colonised, still bound by the dark chains of oppression.

How could I claim to be free when I still practise the beliefs brought by the oppressors, the Christianity forced upon my ancestors, the western values that erased our heritage, and the colonial systems that made our people forget the magical ways of our people.

As I began to explore my indigenous spirituality, I felt a sense of yearning, of connection to my ancestors, and of longing to become a proud and mighty warrior and shake off the hands of colonialism from my being. With each step, I felt myself becoming more whole, more free.

I stared at the broken pieces of my dreams, and six months in, I realised that there were others like me, fighting the same battles, struggling to break free from the clutches of colonialism. Together, we could shatter the chains that bound us. We could reclaim our heritage and forge a new path.

But for now, I remained trapped, a prisoner of a system that seemed determined to hold me back. The sound of my ancestors' struggles still echoed in my mind, a reminder of the long and difficult journey ahead.

**What a Day!**

**by Nolwazi Muvundure**

**Grade 8, Pride Learning Academy**

I woke up early in the morning feeling sleepy and exhausted. I placed a pot filled with water on the stove, and I went back to sleep. I woke up some time later and saw that the water was boiling, noticing that the water was half what I left when I went to sleep. I then realised that if the water was boiling for a long time that meant I was also asleep for a long time. I checked the time; I was hours behind schedule and was late for school.

Unfortunately my mother came out of her bedroom and came into the kitchen. She saw the pot of water boiling and yelled at me so hard that I ended up crying. I bathed and dressed as quick as lightning. When I was still on my way to school, I slipped and fell in the mud; it had rained so it was wet and muddy outside. I had to go back home and change my uniform for another one. I found my mother doing the house chores; still angry about the incident in the morning, she was murmuring to herself.

I changed into another uniform and went back out. I was the only learner on the road; I was so late I could as well have stayed at home, as if my mother was ever going to allow that to happen. When I got to school I was so late it was already break time. I sat on the school lawn and ate my food. Before I went into the classroom, the after-break-time bell rang. Everyone ran into their respective classrooms, while I stood up and cleaned myself. I stood near the classroom door, hesitating to go in. It was so quiet with everyone attentively listening to the teacher. It was as silent as a grave, and when I went in everyone looked at me as if I was Satan himself entering a church.

I apologised for being late and told my excuse, but still the teacher punished me. I spent the whole lunch time watering the school garden with other late-comers. When school was over and I was on my way back home, I sank deep into my thoughts, reflecting on what had happened that day. When I was nearly home I saw a white piece of paper under a rock. I hesitated but ended up picking it up. I opened it and read what was written on it. It said, "GOOD LUCK," and the words placed a smile on my face. I do not know why, but I wasn't feeling blue anymore, I felt joy in my heart and thought: what a day! and just hoped for the better tomorrow.

## **A Bite of Forgiveness**

**by Philani Ncube**  
**Grade 11, Providence Academy**

We all sat around the fire on our cow-skins. Our legs were stretched out and our hands were drawn to the fire like metal to a magnet. The house was dead silent and one could almost slice the tension in the room with a knife. The phone rang and my grandmother picked it up and put it to her ear.

“Yes,” she said in a stern voice, and after a few seconds she slid the phone back into her pocket. Everyone looked at her, waiting for the verdict. She wiped the streaming tears off her face and told us it was fine. Jabulani and I sprang to our feet and hugged each other, while Thabani and Thuboni ran to hug our grandmother.

Our grandfather had been sick for the past few days and was urgently taken to the home of traditional healers. Everyone was happy once again and our eyes glowed as the fire illuminated our faces. After a few drops of tears and hugs, we went to our rooms to rest. We had to get our beauty sleep, and our parents were on their way.

We opened our squeaky door, and the darkness lured us in. We found our ways to our beds through bumping, pushing each other and laughter. It was already light so we didn't bother lighting the candles. We just slept, although for a few minutes I could not sleep, and excitement grew in me like a bush fire. I wondered how my mother's face looked, not that I have forgotten. Then I closed my eyes and away I flew to dreamland. I heard my grandmother singing, her voice so elegant.

I remembered those days when I used to be sick and how I would sleep on her lap while we waited in a queue to enter the home of traditional healers in Kwa Mzilonkotha, but this singing was different. It was a call, my time to wake up, which I gladly ignored for a while.

After I finished my work on the farm, I went to the big tree on our compound with my goat skin and read my book, *Dreaming of Light*. After a few minutes I heard my cousins screaming and I knew our parents had arrived. I stood up and ran and hugged my mother; she looked at me, her face beaming, and she said, “We are going to Johannesburg together.”

I barely remember my journey to Johannesburg but what I do remember is jamming to an amapiano song “Amanikiniki” by Kamo Mphela; and how for the first time the night was not filled with darkness but only beauty and light. I had embraced darkness for years but in just one night light resided in me. It reminded me of how the Zama Zama boys felt, when they came out of the mine and for the first time in six months saw the light. We stepped out of the car and my mother said to me, “Son, this is your home.” I stood there trying to process that I was going to live not in a hut but in a flat.

We entered the flat through the electronic gate and everything was different, but it was a good different. The night went on, days went on, and January approached. The day finally came and I had to go to school, my first early morning in Jozi. The morning was busier than I

anticipated, the atmosphere filled with different flavours and different languages, all interacting at the same time. It was the first time I saw a quote come to life: "Diversity in Unity is the true beauty of humanity." My mother took me to school. I went in there and I got bullied like it was normal, but bullying is not normal and if you are being bullied, report it to a trusted teacher, or parent, or call 1-800-273-8255. Cyber bullying did not get to me because I did not have a phone, but verbal bullying was a different story. Apparently to them, I was thin, too dark, and too smart; and my family practised witchcraft. The audacity of those teenagers.

For weeks I hated the way I looked, I hated the way I walked, and I hated the way teachers loved me. I loathed myself, but in the midst of all that hatred there was one thing I loved about me, my grandmother's voice that woke me up every day. It was at that point that I realised I was not a Mama's boy, I was a grandma's boy, and the only thing I learned from her was strength; she never taught us or spoke to us about how she practised it, she just showed it to us, she took matters into her own hands, she took care of the whole family when grandfather was sick, and at that moment I knew what I had to do.

Night finally came and it was time to go to my room and sit in the darkness. I lit my candle and plotted. I wrote all the crazy scenarios of how I was going to make them pay, not because I was weak or afraid but because I was raised to be a man of integrity and wisdom. I was going to report them.

No one called me names that morning; it was as if they knew the horror I had in store for them. After break the teachers went to a meeting. That demon of a prefect was supposed to keep the class quiet. He went in front of the classroom called out my name and they went dead silent. His next words were, "Your grandmother..." Everyone was silent, not even a single soul reacted to his comment, and for the first time I saw the real him, the vulnerable boy who was disappointing his whole life. A voice emerged from the back: "That was not funny." The class roared in excitement and laughter, and for the first time I felt that these teenagers were not all demons, there were good people, good friends among them.

After school I thought he would come and apologise but he did not. He looked at me and went the opposite direction. I took matters into my own hands and followed him. I had to make him apologise. I knew I was not evil, I knew I was not bad, the world had transformed me, he had changed me. I was not born but was made a monster. He turned back as I was following him, and I looked at him dead in the eye and punched him. He started crying and I saw that vulnerable young boy, as he told me his tragic story of how his younger brother committed suicide because of bullying.

He then took me to his brother's favourite place, a kota kitchen; and with my first bite, I almost forgave. I looked at him and beneath his scared face I saw pain, so pure, so disheartening, so vulnerable. He was not a monster, he was a victim of circumstance, broken little pieces that needed a gentle hand to put them together. All he needed was a chance.

In each and every bully there is a young boy or girl who needs love, a hug and to be loved. Report them, they need help.

**The Forgotten Flame**  
**by Rachel Moyo**  
**Grade 8, Learnmore Institute**

There lived a fifteen-year-old girl named Nandi who stayed in a small cottage in Newlands with her mother. Nandi's father had passed away when she was only three years old, and since then her mother had tried to bring different men into their lives to act as father figures. Unfortunately, none of them ever stayed, and none could fill the gap her father had left.

Their neighbour was a lonely man who worked hard during the day, but drank heavily every evening. Every night after work, he would sit outside his house, singing loudly with a bottle in his hand, until he stumbled inside and fell asleep.

One evening, Nandi was in her room, studying for her upcoming exams, when suddenly the lights went out. It was load-shedding. Frustrated, she packed her books away and went to the kitchen, where her mother had just finished preparing dinner. They ate together by candlelight, chatting softly while listening to the neighbour's off-key singing from outside. He sounded even more drunk than usual.

After dinner, Nandi and her mother made sure to blow out all the candles and unplug all appliances before heading to bed. As always, her mother reminded her to check that everything was switched off. Nandi nodded, not knowing that danger was lurking just next door.

Meanwhile, in the neighbour's house, the drunken man had lit a candle and placed it on a small table next to the curtain. He then collapsed on the couch and quickly fell into a deep sleep. The candle slowly burned down. Eventually, it tipped over, and the flame caught the edge of the curtain. Within minutes, the fire had spread across the living room.

The man woke up coughing, eyes wide with panic. Flames surrounded him, and the thick smoke made it hard to breathe. He tried to escape through the front door, but it was blocked by fire, and the doorknob was too hot to touch. Desperate, he screamed for help.

Nandi heard the screams and rushed to her window. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw flames coming from the neighbour's house. She ran to wake her mother. Her mother immediately called the fire department, who promised to come as quickly as possible.

Outside, neighbours were gathering, some trying to throw water on the fire using buckets. Nandi felt a strong urge to help. She quickly came up with an idea. She grabbed a wooden

chair from their house and, with her mother's help, rushed to the neighbour's front door. Together, they used the chair to force the door open.

The door finally gave way, and the man stumbled out just as the fire truck arrived. The fire fighters rushed in to put out the blaze and check for damage.

As the man was being taken to the hospital, he looked at Nandi and whispered, "Thank you for saving my life."

From that night on, the man never drank again. He remembered the fire, the fear—and the young girl who had risked everything to save him.

## **A Mother's Void**

**by Siphesihle Ndlovu**

**Grade 11, Providence Academy**

As I walk back home with my shoulders slumped like I have the world on my shoulders, I sit on a nearby rock to breathe. The sun is scorching hot as I feel it burning my already dark skin. As if that isn't enough, I am wearing a torn dress with the torn shoes I have worn for as long as I can remember.

My name is ThingolokuKhanya Gumede, and I am nineteen years old. Life has never been easy since my father passed away when I was just six years old and clueless. Mostly I have bits of memories of my father, but when people ask about the meaning of my name, then memories of my father flood my mind like it was just yesterday that I was spending time with him. This is my story.

My mother was not herself when my father passed away; she became a drunkard and hated me for no reason I know of. She started inviting her friends from the village tavern a few months after we buried our father. The house I called home turned into a hangout spot for drunkards, with a mother who was protector turned into someone I had to stay away from.

I started fending for myself from a young age, by offering to do the neighbour's laundry for money, just so I could buy myself food. I would clean the house even though it was all in vain.

I continued going to school even though I was bullied not only by learners but by my teachers too. I was bullied because of my dark skin, my huge wild afro, and my worn out school-wear. In my case I don't think they would just bully instead of helping me out; I think they bullied me because I had no one to protect me.

I excelled in my studies which made the bullying worse, but that did not stop me from going to school. I had one goal at the back of my mind and that was to pass with distinctions so I could get a student fund to attend a prestigious university out of this village.

I keep sitting on this rock in the hot sun, thinking about how my life keeps going downhill. I finished matric a year ago and passed with distinctions, but the school did not consider signing my name for suggestions for the student fund because of my background.

Tears make their way down my face as I think about how things would have been if my father was alive. It does not help feeling sorry for what could have been, so I stand up

wiping my tears with the palm of my hand. I see my house from a distance, and I can tell by the open door that my mother's friends are there again.

As I am approaching the door, I bump into a drunk man who looks lost, probably one of my mother's friends. I find my mother passed out on the couch that I have tried cleaning it up several times. I chase everyone out of the house and then I try cleaning the house and cooking what I earned for the day.

"Thingo?" she calls my name like she does not remember me. I turn to give her food, but she just looks at the food. "Ma Dlamini gave it to me after I did her laundry and cleaned her house" I say to her as she looks sceptical. We eat in silence; I guess we are caught up in thoughts.

"So how is school going, you must be excited to be in the 10th grade." I breathe and draw in a long breath to avoid getting angry. "I finished school a year ago, Ma." She avoids looking at me and I am sure she is embarrassed. I just do not care but deep down I feel hurt.

I go to bed feeling sad and I hear the door shut; for sure it is my mother going to the tavern. I grab my father's photo and put it under my pillow as I have been doing for as long as I can remember. "ThingolokuKhanya, shine as the rainbow." I open my eyes as I get frustrated, because I have been having the same dream of my father saying those words to me since I was young.

Today, I feel different, maybe it is about time I start fighting for myself. I decide to stay at home today to weigh my options so I can bring change to my life. My mother returns home, and to my surprise she is sober and carrying plastic bags filled with groceries. I choose to ignore her and focus on fighting for me.

It's been a month since I decided to stay at home and focus on turning my life around. My mother has been sober which is surprising me because she had not been sober in over thirteen years and she has been trying to reach out, but I am not ready to reciprocate.

She stands in front of me as she looks at forms from different universities and I see a look I have never seen from her; she looks worried. "Thingo, I spoke to your aunt in Durban, and she is willing to take you in and help you with applying to universities using her resources." I just look at her, stunned. She spoke to me like her daughter and reached out to my aunt?

I am lost for words as I attack my mother with a hug. This feels good, and no one has ever thought of helping me out with my load. This is all I have ever wanted in my life. I have wanted a MOTHER.

**I Am Ubuntu**  
**by Tionne Makubvure**  
**Grade 9, Pride Learning Academy**

In the village of Thathe lived a young fourteen-year-old girl, and her name was Tshanduko, meaning “change”. She lived with her grandmother and cousins. Her parents had left her and gone to start their lives afresh in the city. Tshanduko was known as a fierce girl; people often said she had the spirit of a lioness, proud and wild. But beneath her sharp words and stone-cold gaze was just a hurt and lonely girl. She was like that because she was afraid to love. When her parents left, she became the lioness she is right now, much stronger on the outside and broken inside. She believed that to survive she had to be tough and never show her weakness. So she built walls around her heart, walls that kept others out, even those who truly loved and cared for her.

Everyday Tshanduko walked through the dusty streets. She was like a shadow; wherever she stepped, you could feel the fire burning in her. When children laughed, she looked their way and hissed like a snake. When friends reached out, she scared them off like a monster in the shadows. The more she tried to be strong, the more she broke, just like a glass that was being heated under much pressure. The fire inside her was burning out and leaving only ashes of anger and pain in her heart.

In the village every Saturday there was a village meeting. On one beautiful Saturday, sky clear, and soothing sounds of water enchanting in their ears like a melody, everyone gathered under the large, scarred, and oldest tree of the village. The air was thick with anticipation. The elders spoke softly but with power and wisdom. They spoke about Ubuntu, the ancient African belief that said, “I am because we are”. They explained how strength comes from unity, kindness, understanding, and love.

Tshanduko’s ears were open just for the sake of hearing, but her heart was closed. “How can I be part of this?” she thought. “I am not like them. I have no time for being sweet. I have a heart of stone, not of a baby. I am a lioness, powerful and fearless.” That night Tshanduko sat alone beneath the stars, staring deep into space. The vast sky seemed to whisper secrets to her. She remembered her grandmother’s gentle voice, “A heart that loves is stronger than that of a fierce warrior.” Tears came out of her eyes as she reminisced about the person she had become. Those tears were not because she was ready to demolish the walls she had built in her heart.

But Tshanduko changed, and she helped people in the village and even spoke sometimes. The word spread quickly. People were surprised to see Tshanduko helping others, laughing

and smiling. Some said, "That fierce lioness is changing! The heavens will descend." Some welcomed her change with warm hearts and open arms.

Yet change was not easy. Sometimes her old anger bubbled to the surface like a volcano that was threatening to erupt. She would snap at friends or retreat into exile. But each time, the spirit of Ubuntu overpowered her. It reminded her to forgive herself and try again. Like a diamond slowly forming under pressure, Tshanduko's heart was evolving and Ubuntu was growing inside of her.

One day during the harvest festival, Tshanduko stood before the village. She spoke with a steady voice full of hope but also full of power. "I am not the same girl who hid behind anger and pain all those years ago. I have changed. I am Ubuntu because I belong to you and you belong to me. Together, we are stronger. Together we are one!" Her words touched many hearts that day. Tshanduko had become a true beacon of inspiration to others.

Her journey taught her and everyone around her that the true strength is not about fighting alone. It's about holding hands, sharing burdens and lighting each other's paths when days are dark.

Tshanduko's name had always meant change, but now she really knew its meaning. Not only she, but the whole village, knew it's meaning.

She whispered to the wind and said, "I am Ubuntu and Ubuntu lives in us."

## **BATJHA KAOFELA RUNNER-UPS**

**The Two Best Scientists**  
**By Anenyasha Chibatamoto**  
**Grade 7, Education Alive**

Once upon a time, there were two scientists who were best friends. Those two scientists were Mathew Dlamini and Eric Fortsword. Those two scientists were not only good scientists, but they were the best two scientists in the world. Dr Mathew wasn't very fond of the way the earth was; he said, "We're too used to being stupid. These days when we find someone stupid we comfort them instead of helping them."

Although Dr Eric liked the way people understood different explanations, his words were, "If we all understood the same things, nothing would be special about us. We are humans with different understandings. That's what makes us special." So the two scientists never liked the way the other thought. One day, while the two scientists were working on a very special project, a school came to the lab of the scientists for a trip. The students wanted to see the two scientists in action, although Dr Mathew was very angry at the school for coming unannounced.

The teachers told him they were invited. Dr Mathew was confused and didn't remember inviting them over, so he asked the teachers who invited them, and they said Eric Fortsword did! Dr Mathew was furious at Dr Eric, but it was already done. Dr Eric wanted to show Dr Mathew the beauty of different understandings. Dr Eric told Dr Mathew to take the school around the lab and show them their inventions. Dr Mathew tried to refuse but Eric told him to just give it a try, so Dr Mathew agreed and said this would be the first and last time he would do this. Dr Mathew showed the school their first invention.

Dr Mathew said, "This here is Dr Eric's and my invention. It was called the gees uitwees 3000 which stands for mind-erase 3000. It is able to erase ten years' worth of memory, but was never used on actual humans, only on animals such as rats." The entire class was shocked that only two people had made that much progress in a matter of months. Dr Mathew also showed them their version of flying cars which used hydro-liquid fans for more care for the environment. Dr Mathew showed them a bunch of other inventions and was actually enjoying having them asking questions, such as how they powered their inventions. Dr Eric smiled, looking at Mathew enjoying himself. Dr Mathew showed them an invention they had made in only three weeks. It was called the invigilator, or known as virtual memory.

It was a small headset which covered their eyes and ears. Dr Mathew explained that it scanned the cerebrum and showed a reality of what the user was thinking. For example, if he thought of buildings full of ice cream the headset would show the buildings full of ice

cream. The headset would also scan the somatosensory cortex and make sure everything you touched in the headset you would feel in real life.

The students wanted to put it on, but they were still in beta and testing. However, Dr Mathew let them put the invigilator on. As soon as they put the invigilator on the students started thinking of all their dreams and imaginings. Dr Mathew had told them they could share their thoughts if they wanted to, so the entire class shared their thoughts. Dr Mathew and Dr Eric decided to join and see what they were thinking of. Everyone was enjoying their thoughts until the memory chips started to fry. Dr Mathew noticed but by the time he did it was too late. Everyone was trapped in the invigilator, and they couldn't escape. "DAMN IT!" Dr Mathew shouted, and Dr Eric said, "Dang it, I knew we should've gotten the tera bite chip. We're now trapped in the invigilator." The entire class was afraid and started thinking the worst, but the more they thought the more the chip fried. Dr Mathew was furious once again, telling himself he should've listened to his gut and not let the school in. Everyone was scared, even Dr Mathew and Dr Eric, until one student said, "What if we overload the headset? I mean if the chip is fried it means the headset won't be able to process all our minds at once."

Dr Eric was impressed, because the kid was right. If everyone thought of something huge or hard to process the headset would have to factory reset. Dr Eric shouted, "Everyone think of something impossible, and it should reset the headset." Everyone did it, and sure enough it worked almost instantly. The scientists asked how he had thought of it, and he said he saw it in a movie once.

The day ended, and the school said they appreciated being invited and hoped to come back soon. Dr Eric asked if he thought earth was still horrible and Dr Mathew said, "It could be better," but even he knew it was amazing. Dr Eric said, "Even the dumbest of dumb can surpass the genius in moments of being down." In the end Dr Mathew realised he still had a lot to learn about mankind.

**The Last Paper Plane**  
**by Anzani Munzhelele**  
**Grade 11, Centurion College**

The final bell of the school year echoed through the halls, a sound that marked the start of summer for most students. For Liam, it felt more like an ending than a beginning.

He stood by the window of the empty classroom, holding a crumpled piece of notebook paper. Around him, desks sat quiet and still, and the whiteboard still displayed the words "Have a Great Summer!" scribbled in cheerful, fading marker.

Liam folded the paper slowly, carefully creasing each line. It was the last paper plane he would make in this classroom. Mr Bennett, his favourite teacher, had announced last week that he was retiring. That hit Liam harder than he expected. Mr Bennett wasn't just a teacher—he was the one who noticed when Liam was having a bad day, who encouraged his love for writing, and who always had time to talk.

As the plane took shape, Liam remembered the first time he had stayed after class to ask Mr Bennett a question. He'd been nervous, shy, unsure. But Mr Bennett had listened like Liam's words mattered. That small moment had changed everything.

The plane was finished now—simple, sharp, and light.

Liam stepped closer to the window, opened it, and felt the warm breeze rush in. He held the paper plane out and whispered, "Thank you."

Then, he let it fly.

It soared out into the open air, catching the wind, twisting, gliding. Liam watched it until it was just a dot against the summer sky, then finally disappeared.

He smiled.

Later that day, Mr Bennett found the paper plane resting in the grass near the teacher's parking lot. He unfolded it gently. Inside, written in Liam's careful handwriting, was a single sentence:

"You helped me believe in myself. I'll never forget that."

Mr Bennett stood there for a long moment, the wind tugging at his sleeves, and smiled.

**The Pressure of Education**  
**by Gugulethu Mlandu**  
**Grade 9, Pride Learning Academy**

As students we are pressured to live up to certain expectations, our educational life planned before it begins. We are expected to thrive through everything we do. But is that what we really want? Sometimes teachers, parents and our community expect us to pass and be the best of ourselves, but the pressure we go through is not for the weak. The long study sessions we have just to prove ourselves to people who are going to doubt us without giving a thought to the poor student who gave it all they had, only to be discouraged by the people they love.

Patience was a student who had excelled in her studies since pre-school, but things were different in high school. In the first term her grades dropped dramatically from being in the top two to being in the top five. As soon as she saw her marks it felt as if she was stuck in an endless abyss, and as soon as her mom got her marks all the comfort walls she had built for herself at home came crushing down while insults started pouring out of her mom's mouth.

She was told that she liked boys, had lost focus on her school work, she was going to be pregnant, she was useless, her late father would be very disappointed in her, she wished she had never given birth to her, she was a curse in disguise, she would never make it in life. The pain she felt piercing through her heart was unbearable, the tears flowed from her eyes like a river, and she started suffocating, but the insults did not stop.

She wanted to run out of the room, but if she did, she would be considered rude. Another expectation she had to meet; she stood there motionless like a corpse, deprived of life after being shouted at. Then she went up to her room and sat down in silence, in the dark, cold room as she slowly slipped into depression, but she had to pretend like nothing happened, because she would be labelled dramatic, overreacting, and acting like a child. Those were the insults she received when she tried voicing how she felt.

She resumed school the following day, pushing herself to the limit, but in doing so, she was killing herself. She distanced herself from her friends, focused more on her studies, but still her mother was never pleased with her results, until one day she decided not to try any more. She had lost hope, and any motivation and inspiration she had left her. She became rebel.

Her mother spoke until she gave up, but then her mother realised that she was root cause of it all. She still insulted, her not realising that she was pushing her daughter further away, this happened for nearly half a year until one day when God sent an angel in disguise. Her class teacher had come to the realisation that the once bubbly girl was no longer the same; she

had lost the spark in her eyes, the laughter that had once had the ability to turn a bad day into a good one. The once talkative girl was gone, and the poor girl was on the brink of suicide.

Her teacher, Miss Lethukhanya, a name meaning to bring light, sat down with her, trying to find the problem, at first, she was constrained, and felt shy, lying and saying she was okay, until she realised that her teacher was her safe spot, someone to whom she could tell all her problems and worries. Patience started venting all her problems to her class teacher, and Miss Lethukhanya understood everything that she was going through and tried comforting her. For the first time in months her teacher heard her laughter, and after the one-hour venting session, Patience felt as if the load she had been carrying for months was lifted off her shoulders. Miss Lethukhanya explained to her that Patience was no longer living for herself but was now living for expectations which had drawn the life out of her. Patience's mother ended up understanding that she put too much expectation on her daughter, and she promised to improve, apologising. From there onwards Patience's life became a lot easier, the communication between daughter and mother improved a lot, and Patience was back to the bubbly and loving girl she used to be, full of friendliness and surrounded by a positive energy that brought happiness to a lot of people.

Sometimes parents think we are not being serious about our school work, but they don't know the battle we face emotionally, physically and mentally, and by shouting they are making things worse, they are discouraging and making us feel like trash. As students we sometimes feel like our parents think we enjoy getting low grades and being compared to other learners or people we know, but the truth hurts inside because as people we are born different and we are built differently; we just smile and pretend like it's all okay but deep inside it's not. Making competition to motivate a learner is a good thing but it can be done in other ways rather than comparing someone to someone else.

I hope and believe that this message reaches not only students but also parents so that they can reflect on their behaviour and not make further mistakes.

**Boy With Big Dreams**  
**by Jerry Mpaza**  
**Grade 7, Learnmore Institute**

In a small village in South Africa, deep in the rolling hills, there was a boy whose name was Sanele. He lived with his mother and younger sister. Their home was a tiny hut with a roof that usually leaked when it rained. These were days that were very hard, there was never enough of food, and every morning Sanele walked barefoot from home to school on the rocky and dust roads.

But despite the hardships, he had dreams bigger than the sky. He wanted to become an author. Sanele loved to learn; his favourite subject was English, and he would spend time reading borrowed books and listening to his teachers' explanations and lectures. Sometimes he sat under the old marula tree imagining himself standing in front of a large audience, telling stories that would inspire people.

One afternoon, his teacher announced that there would be a writing competition at the book fair in the nearest town. The winner would receive a scholarship to a better school. Sanele's heart raced; this was his chance to show that his studies could pay off. At home Sanele found an old notebook with torn pages and began writing. He wrote about his village that had the laughter of children playing in the river, and the elders who shared wisdom under the moonlight. He wrote about the ups and downs of the village. But as the deadline approached, doubt crept into his mind. "No one will choose my story," Sanele thought. "I am just a poor boy."

His mother saw his sadness and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Your words have power, Sanele. Don't let fear silence them." Encouraged by his mother's words, he finished his story and handed it in. Days later he was called to the front of the classroom. His teacher's eyes were showing excitement. "Sanele!" she called with a big smile. "You have won!" Tears filled Sanele's eyes. The boy who once felt invisible was now seen, and he would go to a new school, and have a chance in the world.

As the class cheered for Sanele, he was very happy. As he stood under the marula tree that evening, looking up at the stars, he whispered, "One day I will tell my story to the world." And deep in his heart, he knew that dreams, no matter how big, were never too far away.

**Life is Unscripted Moments**  
**by Laurel Ndro**  
**Grade 10, Providence Academy**

I've always wondered why babies cry when they're first born. Beyond the obvious reasons, I think it's their first response to the unknown world ahead. I was never considered a cry-baby—my only concern was getting my daily dose of milk and joining the party in slumberland.

I've often heard the saying, "People come and go." I never truly understood it until I experienced it first-hand. Letting go of someone or something you're not ready to lose is never easy. I've felt this most deeply when I had to say goodbye to people I held close to my heart. On the outside, I seem as tough as a boulder, but inside I'm as fragile as glass—easily shattered by harsh words, ill intentions, and painful goodbyes. The best way to soften the blow is to love them less.

But that's not easy for me. I'm a lover girl—I care too much, even when my love isn't returned. Over the years, I've learned not to pour into someone's glass if they wouldn't do the same for me. Memories are like pieces of art: beautiful, layered, and sometimes bittersweet.

**Lerato's Journey**  
**by Leader Nkomo**  
**Grade 7, Learnmore Institute**

Lerato woke up before sunrise, the cool morning air brushing against her skin. She lived in a small village surrounded by golden fields and distant mountains. As the eldest of three sisters, she had always been the one to take charge, fixing things when they broke, helping her mother at the market, and making sure her siblings got to school. But this month felt different. It was Women's Month, and for the first time, she was determined to do something that would inspire the girls in her community.

One afternoon, Lerato overheard a group of boys laughing at the idea of a girl leading the annual hiking challenge to the top of Mount Naledi. The challenge was no small task — it was steep, dangerous, and exhausting. Lerato decided that she would join, not just for herself, but to show the younger girls that bravery had no gender. She trained every day after school, running through dusty paths, carrying heavy buckets of water to build her strength, and learning the safest routes from an old hiker in the village.

The day of the climb arrived. The early morning mist clung to the trees as Lerato set off with the group. Some doubted she could keep up, but she pushed forward, step by step. Her legs burned, her hands ached from gripping rocks, but she kept thinking of her sisters watching from home. Hours later, she reached the summit. Standing at the top, with the wind whipping her hair and the valley stretching below, she smiled. She had proved to herself—and to everyone else—that women are capable of conquering any mountain, real or symbolic.

***(Trigger Warning, description of rape)***

**I Tried to Talk but No One Listened**

**by Lindy Gumede**

**Grade 11 New Model Private College**

She was tired of the pain, she was tired of the way she felt, she was tired of the sleepless nights and unbearable nightmares. She stood in front of a mirror, tears streaming from her eyes as she took one last look at herself before she took her own life. Her parents got home hours later to find her lifelessly hanging from the ceiling fan. Her mom fell to her knees and let out a scream mixed of agony, shock and heartbreak. Her father picked up a note she wrote before her death, that read, " I TRIED TO TALK BUT NO ONE LISTENED". Lerato Motlau was a sixteen-year-old girl who was an only child to her parents. They lived together in a small house in Soweto. Lerato was well-known to the entire town for her breathtaking beauty and her respectful behaviour. She was an excellent student and very popular in school.

Lerato was so beautiful that girls wished to be her, and guys would turn their heads as she passed by just to witness her beauty. She had a model-like figure, and she was as neat as she was beautiful. Lerato lived a normal teenage life full of friends, guys, parties and school work. Her parents and teachers adored her as she was a perfect child with perfect grades and perfect behaviour. Lauren, Lerato's mother, always believed that Lerato dolled herself up to attract the attention of boys. Did she? Lerato was a good girl; she always took part in community activities like fundraisers, she respected everyone she knew, and was a good role model in her community.

She loved playing netball every Saturday from 16:00 to 18:00. It was the twenty-fifth of November on a Saturday afternoon, she wore her three-quarter shorts, a black crop top, and a white hoodie. It was a ten-minute walk to the netball court from her parents' house so she grabbed her netball gear and headed off early. As she took her usual silent walk to the court, she noticed three men following her from behind. She tried taking a different path but they kept following her, and fear and panic started building up in her chest, so she ran.

She ran faster than she ever had in her life, and she did not dare look back. She arrived breathless at the venue and tried to tell her teammates about the men who were following her. To her dismay her teammates did not take her seriously because they assumed she wanted attention. Lerato ended up convincing herself that she was being paranoid and later forgot about the men.

Their training came to an end as it was time for them to go home. Lerato had to go home alone because the friends who usually walked home with her were absent. The sunset was a dazzling colour that made the sky seem brighter than it usually was, so Lerato decided to walk home and believed she would make it home before the sun fully set. As she walked she met familiar people and greeted them and had short conversations with some. She realised that she wasted time, and it was getting darker and late so she took a short cut. She did not notice the men following her as she took an isolated route with very few people and which was sometimes totally empty. One of the men caught up with her and spanked her. In shock and rage she quickly turned around and attempted to slap him but the man caught Lerato's wrist in mid-air and smirked. She saw his face and her heart nearly stopped as she realised it was one of the men who had followed her earlier that day. Lerato tried to free her wrist from the man's huge muscular hand but his grip was that of a lion. She looked at him in disgust and shouted, "What do you want from me?" He chuckled, revealing his bright yellow teeth that seemed to have last been brushed a century ago, and whispered in a crackling drunkard voice, "You know what I want, ntombazan."

Lerato let out an ear-piercing scream, hoping someone would come to her rescue. However, she was silenced by a hard slap on her cheek from the man. She silently cried, cupping her painful cheek in her hand. The man whistled and seconds later the two other men that Lerato had seen earlier appeared out of the shadows. One of the men immediately tied a dirty cloth over Lerato's mouth and tied her hands together. They each took turns touching her inappropriately and chuckled every time she flinched at their touch. Lerato cried so much that tears seemed to have been totally drained from her eyes, as they slowly removed her pants, she tried to scream but the cloth muted her. One after the other they penetrated her until she was numb. She could not move and just lay there like a corpse. The men left her there, stranded in the darkness as she tried to regain control of her limbs. She got home an hour late to find her mother fuming with rage. Lerato told her mother that she was raped with hope to get some consolation and help, but her mother blamed her. Lerato felt like her whole world was crashing down. "You always wear revealing clothes and show off your beauty... That's what you get, mntanam," her mother said as she left the room. Lerato could not believe her ears; her chest tightened up and thick tears fell from her eyes. She could not tell anyone else. Only her mother knew. She spent months with the secret and lost all that she was. Her grades dropped, she was not comfortable in her own body anymore and she stopped interacting with people the way she usually did. Sooner or later people started hating her and calling her arrogant. Lerato spent numerous nights crying herself to sleep or not sleeping at all. She felt like the world had turned its back on her and she could not take it anymore.

**Girl in Blazer**  
**by Michelle Ndweni**  
**Grade 8, Learmore Institute**

She wore the blazer with confidence and dignity. She held her head high as she walked along the corridors of her school. Everyone saw a girl with discipline and order, but inside she was broken; she was like a shattered glass.

She wore the blazer as an armour that was protecting her; it was the last gift her late mother gave her. At the school, she heard whispers. "She's strong after everything." "She's probably used to pain." But they didn't know she had tried to bury her pain in the box that would open once the sun sets, when all the pain would come rushing in on her.

The person she loved had departed from this life. What about her father? He was not there for her even in the past and had never been there after her mother's death. Her mother died in her arms. On that day it was raining cats and dogs. The hospital machine beeped, steady then slower, and she held her mother as she felt colder. "Please don't go mom, I'm not yet ready," she whispered. But cancer doesn't wait for readiness, and now she was standing in front of the mirror, blazer on. "You are fine", she whispered. "I am fine." But she was not, she was just surviving a life where the only person who loved her was now a memory. She was curled up on her bed all lonely, as tears streamed down her cheek. The silence was eating her flesh as a consent reminder of how her life was now. She knew this was the only time of the day she could express herself fully without being judged.

She knew that she could only cry when nobody was watching, because her mother taught her that brave people don't cry in front of others. Still she woke up every day, put on the blazer, and went to school regardless of her pain. She was silently defying the pain now she was walking through the halls of her school again, with a soft smile that was just pretence, and she was back with perfect marks, back with confidence, but the grief still followed, she was still sad, still lonely, without a father as well as without a mother.

She's tired and needs rest, not just physically but emotionally as well, She' trying but it doesn't change that she is broken. She's trying, not because she wants to be noticed but so that she can prepare herself for the future that would still hold the saddest memory of her life.

**Autism Zone**  
**by Owale Lutshinda**  
**Grade 9, Rand Girls' School**

A world where you and I are equally treated. That's all I ever wished for. I grew up in the city of Johannesburg with my busy but caring parents.

Growing up I always noticed how autistic kids were hidden from the outside world as though they did not matter. "This is so wrong," I always thought to myself. From a young age I had this recurring dream. A dream to promote equality between everyone despite our differences. My parents were very supportive of my goals but this one in particular they disapproved of it. They would tell me, "Sphe, this is nonsense," or "You are not Nelson Mandela, my son." But I didn't care, I would do it either way.

At school I had an autistic friend, Benjamin. Ben and I had been best friends since we were in Grade 3 and now we were doing our matric together. He hated noise with murderous passion, as well as crowds. I expected people to respect that, but for some reason his autism made him a target for bullying. I never let that get to him, but I saw him hurt. One day during P.E. class our silly classmate Thabo thought it would be funny to blast music very loudly in the class. I saw Ben get uncomfortable and start biting his lips. In anger, I lost control and smashed Thabo's speaker on the ground. That act landed me in trouble, but I didn't care.

After that day Ben got super quiet and less energetic.

After days of watching Ben slip into sorrow and depression, I found out that he had committed suicide. This hurt me because we had always dreamt of attending University together, yet he had silenced himself for eternity.

This loss motivated me and right after high school I started my online autism zone where autistic people could share their struggles and how they overcame them. I shared Ben's story, and it touched the hearts of many. It was then that we decided to stand up to bullying. To become a voice for the autistic. We later founded an organisation called Autism Zone.

Soon our non-profit organisation gained popularity. But we remained with one motive, to assist autistic kids and spread awareness. We visited schools and started to spread awareness and promote equality. Soon we gained funds and used them to give autistic kids free admission to special schools. This later turned into a helping hand where everyone in the community could gather and share motivation with each other. A place where we could

contribute to help those in need without judgement. We later held community gatherings to promote equality. A safe space for all, where you and I are equally treated.

**Imbokodo the Brave**  
**by Tionne Makubvure**  
**Grade 9, Pride Learning Academy**

They say “Wathinta abafazi, Wathita imbokodo.” But what happens when the rock is only fifteen years old? When she’s not yet a rock but just a girl trying to become one?

Lerato was that girl, she lived in a small township on the outskirts of Gqeberha, in a tiny RDP house with peeling walls, the smell of gas stoves, and sounds of kids playing soccer in the dusty streets. Her life was simple: her mother worked in a supermarket and her father had died years ago in a car accident. She was smart at school and helped with household chores, and she was someone filled with love, but they say love isn’t enough to protect you from the dangers of the world.

Her mother met a man called Nkosinathi. He was charming at first and took care of them like they were his own children. Lerato tried to like him, but she could not let anyone take her father’s place. Eventually he showed his true colours. Nkosinathi’s voice became thunder in their home; he shouted often, broke plates, and banged doors. Lerato once saw her mother with a scar on her back. When she asked her mother with a trembling voice about it, she just smiled and said, “Ngikahle mntanami, do not worry.” But Lerato was worried a storm was brewing in their house, and she was stuck inside of it.

One night, when her mother had gone to buy bread and her little brothers were sleeping, Lerato was in the kitchen when Nkosinathi walked in. He was drunk and he smelled of cigarettes and beer. Hovering inside the kitchen, he stood behind her and said, “You’re becoming a beautiful young lady.” Lerato’s whole body erupted with goosebumps. Then he came closer and grabbed her by her waist. She pushed him away and ran to her room, locking the door as her heart pounded like it was going to explode.

The next day she told her mother, but she said, “No Lerato, you must be mistaken. He wouldn’t do such a thing.” That response immediately broke her heart; she felt like they took her soul from her. She stopped smiling and her school marks dropped. The girl who once had a bright and beautiful smile now seemed like she was in a nightmare with monsters in it. Eventually someone saw her pain, and that was her life orientation teacher, Ma’am Dlamini. She noticed the change one afternoon, and she asked Lerato to stay behind after school. “My child, I can see that there is something bothering you. I’m here, talk to me,” she said caringly.

Lerato was tired of the pain and she finally let go. She cried so much that Ma’am Dlamini felt

pity for her. With the help of the school and a social worker, Lerato told her story again. This time people listened, the police was involved, and Nkosinathi was arrested. Lerato and her family were taken to a place far away from Gqeberha where she met with girls who had been through the same thing. Her mother held her and said, “Ngiyoxolisa Sthandwa sami, I was scared, I should have protected you.”

Lerato forgave her because forgiveness was part of healing. When she returned to school, she came back different and stronger, but still soft and kind and with the same fire in her eyes. At one school assembly she stood in front of the hall and said, “I was hurt by someone who was supposed to love me and protect me, but I survived the storm, so if you are going through something, speak up, you are not alone, so don’t be afraid.” The hall was filled with silence, and then someone clapped, then another and soon the hall erupted.

The school started a club called Don’t Be Afraid. They met every Friday after school in their classroom. Years later, Lerato passed matric and went to university to study. She became an activist for children’s and women’s rights and opened a NGO for girls like herself. She never forgot what she had been went through, because she was “Hie imbokodo” the brave!