

Life Story of Netta

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My name is Netta and I am 37 years old. I live in Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats.

I became a sex-worker at the age of 24. I was unemployed and homeless and it seemed like the only way that I could make a living. Now I am a Peer Educator at SWEAT (Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce). I go out and do outreach among sex workers and the community. I teach them about safe sex and do advocacy work especially about the call for the decriminalisation of sex work. I think the community still has lots to learn, not only about transgender, but also about sex workers. They do not understand and they still humiliate them. I am also involved with the Media Team. I am a journalist on the SWEAT magazine SWEAT SCENE.

It is for us to tell people and show them how we feel. It is our bodies and our business. Sex workers must come out and face the people and fight for their rights. It is difficult, though, because sex workers are targeted when they come out. Transgender sex workers have the same challenges as other sex workers, but because people see us as less than human things are even more dangerous for us.

I was nine or ten years old when I realised I was transgender - although I did not know the word then. I just felt that I was not a boy even when others told me I was a boy. I was always "girlish"; and to me that was normal. I always wore girl's clothes, except to school. School was no fun for me. The children humiliated me and called me names.

If I think of my past I think of my family but I was
....not raised by my biological parents.

I don't have any contact with my family, or with the people who raised me. I have three sisters. My mom had a problem with alcohol, and one day when she went on a drinking binge she just left me behind with people at a shebeen. They did not realise I was staying there for days. When they did they started making me do cleaning work and other duties to pay for me living there. I guess I was lucky. I had the basics but there was no care for me as a person. It would have been nice to have a mom who cared for me as a person. The grown ups often referred to me as moffie and dismissed me because I was feminine. I kept going to school even though nobody seemed to care that I did. I was very good at school, but had no grown ups who were interested in my school work.

I used to sometimes come home late just to try to get attention. There were always people there drinking and using drugs. I remember that I never liked to participate in sport and one day when I knew there would be athletics practice I did not go to school. I was 13. The woman who I stayed with told me to go pay the telephone account. On the way I had to cross an open field some gangster boys approached me. One of them knew me and called me a moffie telling the others about my identity and they started to attack me, sexually abused me and took the money. When I got home I told my foster mother. She did not seem to care about what I had gone through and accused me of stealing the money. Living in this home made me very lonely and like I had nobody. After that I told nobody about this and it made me lose faith in people.

I do remember a neighbour who used to be very kind to me. She was the mother of a girl who was my friend. She would come in and see how I am when she visited the auntie I lived with. She would see the hardships I endured and would often just buy me things I needed for school.

Even later when I was a grown up on my 21st birthday she was the only person who remembered and sent her daughter to fetch me. When I arrived at their house she had arranged a braai for me and invited other people to celebrate. She was one of the few people in my life who understood that I was feminine. She would buy me things that were unisex. Later years she became very ill and while she was dying my friend, her daughter, came to look for me. I was 28 then. By the time I got there she was already dead, but she had left me an envelope with money and a letter to say I was the son she always wanted. It did not matter that she said I could have been her son. She could see who I was and loved me in the way I always wanted a mom to love me.

After her death I realised that I had lost somebody who really cared about me.

When I was 28 some people I know told me that there is somebody looking for me. It was the last Sunday of November when the lights go on for the festival season in Cape Town. We were all there at Gardens and the people who were looking for me found me there and with them was my mother. I always felt like I hated my mother - she was a heavy alcoholic, and she knew when she was expecting me that she did not want me. She often deserted me and left me with people when she went on binges. Sometimes she would be away for 3 months. Sometimes the people did not even realise I was staying there. But when they did they would make me work.

When I saw her again I did not recognise her. In my mind she was a drunk from my last memory. She took me aside and wanted to explain her life. She was now a member of the church and was not drinking anymore. I can see she has changed and she has contacted me often since then and seems to want to support me. However when I told her that I have a life threatening condition she seemed a bit taken aback. This is hard for me. I don't think we can be in one another's lives because I cannot be rejected by her again. I don't want gifts from her and money. If I

wanted anything I would rather have wanted her love.

I have met many young transgender women on the road and I try to shelter them when I can and to be there for them when they are in trouble. In my community I am often called Auntie Netta because people come to me when they want to talk about their own rejection and pain. I know how it feels to be rejected. I know I can give love to the people in my life. It is my dream that I will somehow get funding to bring about a shelter for transgender teenagers where I can be the housemother and shelter them.

These kids have beautiful talents but they do not know how to use them. They waste their lives on drugs. They are so young…..

I hate drugs and liquor because it ruined my mother. I do not want to be like that.