

# BACK FROM THE BRINK

**Being homeless doesn't mean losing hope. *marie claire* speaks to people who were once down-and-out and destitute — but chose not to stay there.**

**An unemployed alcoholic, Rosemary Maasdorp, 32, took many years to break the cycle of violence and drinking in her life. Now working full-time and reunited with her children, she wants to become a counsellor to help others in the same position.**

**"A**bout four years ago I lost my job. I was a shop assistant at a local bakery and at the time of my retrenchment I was five months pregnant and supporting my three-year-old daughter. I immediately fell into a depression and started drinking heavily. I lived in a friend's backyard and, when the owners of the property learnt that I'd lost my job, I was forced to leave.

"I had no place to go and for the first time in my life I found myself living on the streets. During the day, my daughter and I would wander around begging for money, while at night we'd seek shelter in a playground or public toilets. From time to time a girlfriend would take us in for the night and I even managed to find some odd jobs. When I had earned a little money, my boyfriend would fetch me and we'd get drunk together. He would then physically and sexually abuse me. When we were both drunk, we'd also beat my little girl.

"I lived on the streets for a couple of months, but when I was eight months pregnant, a friend took

pity on me and suggested that we stay in her garage until my baby was born. After the birth of my son, Wilfred, I had to leave; once again I had nowhere to go. On the streets I heard about a shelter for homeless mothers — it was called St Anne's Home. They gave me and my children a place to stay.

"Despite their charity, I could not stop drinking and would often escape from St Anne's to my boyfriend's house. We'd get drunk and each time I'd suffer violent abuse. One night, I was very drunk and left our three month-old son with him. He left the child on the pavement and the following morning, the police picked me up on the streets and took me to the station. When the carers at St Anne's learnt of this, I was sent to a shelter for battered women for three months. After I came back I found a job at a restaurant. Unfortunately I worked with desserts containing alcohol and the merest whiff enticed me to drink again. I lost the job and left the shelter and was once again on the streets.

"I slept with other homeless people on park benches or in places where we could huddle close together for warmth. In the morning I'd wake up reeking of filth and the smell of the streets. I soon realised that my children needed me and that I couldn't be a good mother to them on the streets. I returned to St Anne's.

"For the first time I really wanted the help they

offered. They gave me a second chance and I wanted to prove myself. I took part in all the training and counselling sessions, and after completing an alcohol rehabilitation programme, I stopped drinking. I took a job as a baker at a local bakery and started looking at life positively.

"I didn't feel a failure any more and as a result my self-esteem improved. I'm no longer ashamed to discuss my past and its problems. I've come to realise that I'm not alone and that I should take responsibility for my life and the lives of my children. I come from a good home and my parents gave me a stable upbringing. I came to Cape Town looking for a better life, but ended up a drunk and living on the streets.

"I've been sober now for about three years and have kept the same job for that period. I've been reunited with my eldest daughter, who stayed with my parents while I was on the streets, and my children are well cared for and healthy. We moved into our own flat a couple of months ago, but I'm still adjusting to my new responsibilities.

"The children and I are very possessive of our flat and our privacy. At the moment we don't want any visitors and hardly ever go out. It's only a three-roomed flat, but for us it's the first place that we can call our own. I rush home after work each day to see my children and we enjoy spending time together in our new home. The children are happier than ever to be a real family again and





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— Rosemary Maasdorp (pictured with her three children)



**“I read about a woman who faced her alcoholism — it was my turning point.”**

**— Frances Fortuin**



**When she was an alcoholic living on the streets, Frances Fortuin's then 10-day-old daughter was removed by the welfare authorities. Today, they live reunited in their own flat.**

they mostly fight over whose turn it is to sit on my lap. They're quite a handful and can become very tiring, especially after a hard day at work. I try to divide my attention equally between them and to make up for all the times I've neglected and even abused them.

“We don't have electricity or a phone yet, but we do have beds to sleep in and a roof over our heads. More importantly, we're together. I try to save a little money every month to buy something for the flat. I don't earn a lot, but I'm putting money aside to buy a fridge and more furniture. The children are already making plans for the future and have promised one day to buy a house.

“I've been given the gift of independence and responsibility and I want to share this with others. I specifically want to help homeless women who are caught up in a cycle of alcoholism and abuse. I'm now trying to get sponsorship to study alcoholic rehabilitation. Perhaps through my own experience I can help others to turn their lives around, as I have mine.”

**Orphaned in her teens, Frances Fortuin, 42, grew up on the streets of Cape Town. When her second child was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, it forced her to reassess her life. She has now been sober for eight years and is working to raise funds for a child care centre while completing a degree in child psychology.**

“I wasn't born on the streets, but for most of my life they were my home. I was brought up by my grandparents in Nababiep, Namaqualand, and when they both died, I was sent to an orphanage. At 14, I eloped to the Cape in search of work and a better life. I made new friends and being young and stupid, I became pregnant at 19. My child was given to foster parents. I was still a child myself and looking for love and attention in all the wrong places.

“Before long I was introduced to alcohol which made me forget my sorrows. But my social glass of wine soon turned into frequent visits to the

bottle store. This problem created others: I could no longer hold down a job for very long.

“My new friends and I spent all our money on booze and would then pass out wherever we fell. We slept in front of liquor stores, in Cape Town's De Waal Park or wherever we managed to walk to. When you're drunk, you don't mind the cold or your uncomfortable surroundings that much. To get through the next day, all we needed was to find enough money to get a drink. Yes, 'bergies' have sex too and after six years on the streets, I became pregnant again. I drank throughout my pregnancy and my baby boy, Steven, was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). At first I rejected my deformed child and gave him up for adoption, but a few days later I changed my mind and took him with me onto the streets.

“I've never been lazy, and when I was sober enough I took odd jobs at a café to earn money. I neglected Steven — some days he went hungry because I'd spent all my money on booze. I was both thankful and sad when welfare took him away. I really wanted to get him back and care for him, so I found a job at a take-away restaurant.

“I went to a night shelter where I met Ruth Oreagan, the social worker who saved my life. Ms Oreagan managed to get me arrested on a drink-related charge after I'd collapsed in a drunken heap. I spent three months on remand in Pollsmoor Prison and six months in De Novo Rehabilitation Centre, before the turning point in my life — I read an article about a woman who had faced up to her alcoholism. Only then did I realise that I had the same problem. I met a man at De Novo, and together we moved to Klerksdorp. He couldn't stay on the wagon, however, and began abusing me and our 10-day-old baby. The welfare authorities once again removed my little girl, and I returned to Cape Town, determined to get my life on track.

“I've been sober for eight years now and have not only turned my life around, but I'm making a difference to the lives of others. I was instrumental in setting up a project at St Anne's Home for homeless mothers with children. I'm also a trustee of the Fetal Alcohol Awareness Syndrome Association, and being a FAS mother myself, I now dedicate my time to educating others about the disease.

“I live in a small flat with my daughter; my son Steven, who stays with his foster parents, visits us





**“We didn’t know how to act, or who would write the scripts. But then we realised that we were already living a drama script.” — Peter Ndebele**

**From living on the streets of Johannesburg, to performing in Washington: MUKA members (clockwise from top left): Peter Ndebele, Goodwill Radebe, Virginia Pilane, Virginia Maubane, Macloud Mncube, Jennifer Makhubalo and Brian Phakathi.**

every weekend. I also play mother to three children who’ve been taken away from their families because they were neglected or abused. We’ve all become a family and we go to church together or have family outings in the park.

“My goal is to start a crisis centre for neglected and abused children and I’m in the process of becoming qualified to do this. I’ve just passed my second year of child psychology for pre-school educators at the University of Cape Town. I’m now working on a proposal to raise funds for an equipped centre where these children can be cared for. Things are still in the planning phase and it’s a lot of hard work to find funding, volunteers, and equipment for the centre. I also want to turn it into a school for children with FAS who have learning disabilities. I’ve set myself a goal and hope to realise this dream within 20 years.

“Times are still hard and some months I struggle to make ends meet, but somehow the children and I always get through. I’ve had a hard life and have wasted about 10 years on the streets. The

important thing, though, is that I’ve managed to pull myself out of the gutter and I’m thankful for the support I’ve been given. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved and now want to support those in need, in the hope that they’ll realise that it is possible to get off the streets.”

— Jo Lennox

**Contributions to St Anne’s Home can be made by contacting Elizabeth Petersen on tel (021) 448 6792/448 8513 or fax (021) 448 8518. Donations to the Ruth Oreagan Crisis Centre can be made by contacting Frances Fortuin on tel (021) 448 6708.**

**Peter Ndebele, 25, is a founder member of the MUKA project. He and other MUKA members were on the streets two years ago, washing cars to earn a living and sleeping under trees at night. Singing occasionally on pavements and in parks, they decided to form a theatre group. Now based in an apartment next to Johannesburg’s Hillbrow Theatre, the group has**

**since won several dramatic awards and travelled to the United States to showcase their unique work.**

“H

illbrow was our home. We would walk the streets singing church hymns and traditional songs. One day I suggested that we form a drama group, and start act-

ing. I’d had some drama experience in school, acting in plays, but we had never done anything like this. We didn’t know how to act, or who would write the scripts. But then we realised that we were already living a drama script.

“The original group comprised about 25 people. We wanted to produce a play that would tell about our own feelings, our own lives. At first, it was very painful. We realised that most of our stories were sorrowful; we’d all lost friends and relatives. Workshopping a play was like aggravating our wounds. We then met a prominent local actor who helped us to get proper rehearsal



venues. In late 1996 we heard about a Youth Drama Festival at the Windybrow Theatre and decided to enter our piece about homelessness — *The Chain*.

"We were the underdogs at the festival. We had no sponsors, and were still living on the street. We didn't need any props — dirty and filthy, we were already costumed. Apparently, when we performed, the judges were in tears. By the end of the festival we had won four awards: Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Script and a second prize in the drama category.

**"A**fter that we continued working with our show. But because we had won those awards, we started thinking it was easy. We moved to a flat in Pretoria Street, but the people who were 'representing' us took all the money we were supposed to be paid. We were told that we were getting exposure from our performances ... and we'd be given food. We didn't get a cent, and after three months we had to leave the flat and go back onto the streets. We learnt the hard way not to trust people; we realised that we could only rely on ourselves to see that we had food in our stomachs and somewhere to sleep. The Hillbrow Theatre, which was our main rehearsal space, was closed down, and most of the group left. We continued working with our original material, condensing the roles so that it could be portrayed by six performers. We also started workshopping an AIDS play for a festival in Sebokeng.

"We didn't tell anyone that we were back on the streets, because we thought they would discriminate against us if they knew. We would go to the YMCA drop-in centre to do our laundry, shower and get some food. We would run away to a park in Bertrams to rehearse, so that no one would see us. This period improved the play a great deal.

"Then we were 'discovered' by the Reverend George Dalka — or, more accurately, Virginia discovered him. She had become restless during a rehearsal and went into town to look for upcoming shows. At the YMCA she met George, who was looking for a theatre group to take to an SABC event the following day aimed at highlighting issues of child abuse. After watching one of our rehearsals he was impressed — more than impressed. He gave us money for food for the day

(it was the first time we'd been 'paid' for a performance), and the next day we went to the SABC. People were impressed, although we offended certain big shots there because, in our piece, we made comments about wealthy politicians who lived in mansions and wouldn't help us.

"We then volunteered for Rev. George's programme, feeding street kids. It was hard to trust him at first, because we'd been lied to by so many, but we took solace in the fact that he didn't make big promises. One day it was cold, so cold. We finally told Rev. George that we were sleeping on the streets, a fact we had hidden from him until then. He was angry, as he realised that we hadn't trusted him enough to tell him. He gave us a room in the church basement and a hall where we could rehearse full-time. He bought us all the basic essentials: clothes, blankets, toiletries ... he gave us a lot.

"We started going to Thembaletu [a girls' shel-

**"After three months we had to leave the flat and go back onto the streets. We learnt the hard way not to trust anyone; we realised that we only had ourselves to rely on."**


ter] where we held drama workshops. One of the girls there, Nokhutula, became very interested and eventually joined the cast, even though she's still at school. We were also working as volunteers at the Methodist Soup Kitchen when we were introduced to an American writer, Roy Barber, who was in South Africa researching for a play he was writing. He expressed interest in the work we were doing. We were very passionate about our drama even though we still weren't getting any money. Before he left, he told us that we'd meet in Washington DC. I didn't think we could believe him, but we were lucky. The good people came after the worst.

"In May 1998 we flew to America. It was like a dream. It took me a week to believe it was real. We performed a lot, and held 28 cultural exchange classes at the school where Roy taught. We were in the US for nearly three months, working on Roy's play *The Gift* (about homelessness and street children in South Africa).

We also performed *The Chain* at an annual festival in Washington and won an award for creative excellence. It was a dream come true and it didn't end there. We recorded a CD, mixing traditional and gospel music, which we dedicated to our friends who are still on the street. It's not on sale here yet, but will hopefully arrive this year.

"When we got back we started work on a follow-up play. *The Chain* is set in a park where people used to live. The follow-up is the true story of the forced removal of these people to Weller's Farm, about 40km outside town with no facilities. We performed our new play, *Survival*, at the reopened Hillbrow Theatre in November 1998, and continue to work on it, as we will be performing it again sometime in 1999. We also write for *Homeless Talk* — articles and poetry — and we have plans to go overseas again, having been invited to the Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany. So our hands are pretty full.

"We don't want to be selfish with what we've learnt. We're planning to create a festival for disadvantaged children, teaching drama, dancing and singing. We'll also invite our elders to come and tell the children something about their past and their culture. MUKA, which stands for Most United Knowledgeable Artists, was created to motivate people to make the best of their skills. In addition to our drama, we've started a sewing project to teach girls in the shelters some marketable skills. Once off the ground, we're thinking of starting projects with beadwork and pottery. After a long struggle it makes us happy to see our progress — but we don't forget our friends."

— Nechama Brodie 

**The MUKA Project welcomes assistance in any form. If you would like to contribute in some way, call their PR Officer, RAU student volunteer Tshogofatso Modisane, on (011) 720 2313, or you can e-mail them at [muka@hixnet.co.za](mailto:muka@hixnet.co.za)**