

International Service Human Rights Awards 2008



The 2008 Human Rights Awards In Depth ...

An interview with Christopher Mulenga - Winner of the Award for the Defence of the Human Rights of Children

Christopher is the Executive Chairman & International Liaison Officer of Friends of the Street Children in Zambia

Interview by Photini Philippidou

How do you feel winning this award?

It's very fascinating. I've never won an award in my lifetime. To receive something of this magnitude and to be recognised by an organisation which operates on a global perspective is really touching.

How will the award affect your work in Zambia?

It will double the recognition that we have at community level and we will use the award to promote more human rights for children. We have made tremendous moves for street children and the award will help us to really engage the government in human rights issues.

What were the challenges you encountered setting up Friends of the Street Children?

A lot of resistance came from the community itself.

The children are used to push drugs and to steal because they are vulnerable. Kitwe is a copper-mining town so anyone can come and put them on a truck and drive them to the mining area to steal.

The children are also used to sell intoxicants like jet fuel or glue. People buy glue from truck drivers and they supply them to children to sell. It's a very organised syndicate. The kids can earn the equivalent of £7 for a bottle, which is a lot of money. The children are supposed to cash in the money, but if they don't they are beaten in the most gruesome circumstances. Sometimes the people who push the glue make the kids sniff it with sewage to ferment it so it becomes more intoxicating.

How do you cope with the community's resistance to your work?

We try to tackle the root causes of this resistance. For example we managed to uproot the company where the glue was coming from, and then we engaged their management in a programme to try to stop black market drug sales. But if you stop one drug the street children will resort to another - there are so many.

I spoke to the Minister of Social Services to ask her to help us use government institutions to put an end to black market drugs. I also spoke to the national airport authority to stop the scourge of supplying these illegal substances to the children. It's quite rampant.

The problem is companies cannot allow the street children to go away. They rely on them because they want things to be always moving. One time we took street children into psychological camps to treat their addiction, but the people in the community complained about the loss of business.

What dangers do you face working on the street?

It's very dangerous working on the street - you don't know what will happen to you. Once I was on the street with the Minister of Social Services, and the street children charged at the Minister without fearing the police that were around her. I pushed myself in front and said: "Hey guys it's me". Suddenly they were saying: "Welcome, welcome," because of the trust that we have.

Through that trust we also have protection. The street children look after me as I move at night on the streets of Kitwe. They are my bodyguards.

Using the same trust we try to remove them from the streets. We ask them to come to our places of work, and when they do we explain to them the importance of leaving the streets.

How do you build trust with the children to persuade them that the street doesn't offer more?

Building trust is the core component of our work. If you can't be trusted you will never get any information about the child.

When somebody dies on the street they see us caring for the dead, or taking them to hospital, and they respect this. With the Outreach Programme we go the street and sit down and talk to them. Sometimes we eat with them on the street. We don't want them to associate our visit with handouts. We try our level best to present ourselves just as we are, and to let them know we are there for them and can provide support. Through that we create that trust.

We also organise different events every year. During Christmas we team up with companies and institutions to bring them together under one roof. The children watch us embracing them and are very happy to see that.

Often the street children gather around to touch me. Everyone says: "Is that man normal? How can he allow the street children to touch him like that?" People are shocked by it.

If a child comes from a family with unemployment, HIV, or extreme poverty, it can seem to the child that the street is better. But we have developed a formidable rapport which enables us to work with them effectively. They trust us and they come to us when they have problems.

How did you set up Friends of the Street Children?

I am one of the two founding members. The other founder is a priest. I was working as a co-ordinator for the Prison and Distress Ministry. One day I went to the street with my colleagues to find out what brings children there so I could tell my church members.

That day some people started developing an interest in what I was doing. One of them was a Congolese priest who then came to my home to ask *why?* He said he was ready to support me and introduced me to a Filipino priest. So we went onto the streets together - the priest was even sleeping there to get a feel of what goes on.

We then started inviting our friends and colleagues, and we formed Friends of the Street Children to try and get a better understanding of why this is happening.

Is there a particular experience which inspired your work?

Before I started Friends of the Street Children, I remember I was in a group with my friends at a church rally sitting under a tree. I watched a street child bypass everybody and come to me to ask for food. He must have bypassed thousands of people and came only to me! I saw this as my calling.

Another time after I started my work, I remember coming from Tanzania Airport. There was a boy in rags and tatters coming to me. He just came straight to me ignoring the rest of my colleagues and asked for help. I feel that this work follows me wherever I am. How do these children find me?

What are the personal rewards of your work?

I feel freer when I am with them. They embrace me; jump on my back, always joking. And when they see me they have a good happy face. I always feel happy with them.

Is there personal story you would like to share?

There was this boy, called Adrian Mustaffa. He was 12 years old when I took him on. I didn't have any kids of my own and I wanted to find out what street children are really like. I got a lot of support from my organisation and I took him into my home as my boy. I was going to school just like a parent to listen to teachers' reports about him. I discovered that the boy suffered a lot of rejection from his family so he wanted to fight back. As a result his behaviour at school wasn't impressive. The teachers were labelling him a 'street-child' and he was using defensive mechanisms by venting anger on his fellow students. I changed schools - the same thing happened.

Then he started stealing from my home. I realised it's a psychological problem that he had. He was fine with me at home but when he was going out I didn't know whether I would find him locked-up in police cells. That's how the children are destroyed, they suffer mental trauma. They see so many people rejecting them and don't trust many adults.

I gave him love and asked my wife to love him. By then we had a first born child and I asked him to look after my baby. I gave him that responsibility. After three years he had changed.

My plans were to send him to boarding school so he could spend three months there, and one month in my home. But one day his sister came. She said she was there for him and I was happy because I managed to reunite him with his family. We are not there to prevent these children from being with their families.

What are the difficulties in raising a street child?

I want to encourage many others to take in a child. But there are dangers. You might be scandalised by the child, and might start blaming them and thinking the child is bad. Children can start doing things that are unpalatable. I always advise our staff not to be carried away by the scandals these kids do because it might affect their work and their perception. There is a temptation to switch off and become negative. But each child is unique.

Lack of resources also presents one of the biggest difficulties. With Adrian it was very difficult to send him to school because we live from hand to mouth, but I managed with the help of our organisation.

How did you sustain long-term commitment to raising a street child?

I realised the most important duty I had was to convince my family and peers to accept this boy unconditionally, and to embrace him like my own child.

Whatever he did, after all his stealing and all those scandals, we always accepted him back. And the good thing is, when I removed him from the street - he never returned.

How do you work with Friends on the Street Children *and* keep a full-time role teaching? What keeps you motivated?

I am a Catholic and Catholic work is known to support the poor. I am poor still. In the bible story *The Widow's Might* you see that the poor help the poor. My inspiration comes from the teachings of Jesus helping the poor and answering their call to save other peoples.

It's also part of the way I was brought up - we were always receiving strangers in our own home. We felt very free at home and my family was outgoing and would embrace every person in the community. That helped me develop in terms of social responsibility.

When I began I didn't know that it was the start of such big work with international recognition. From my family's perspective we were just helping people. So that drove me forward. And getting closer to prayer life has made me realise it is part of my vocation to save the children.

What does the future hold for Friends of the Street Children?

Right now we only have accommodation for 55 children in two houses. But we have a very big project where we are supposed to build eight more. There is a foundation supporting us on this project but we need to continue building more infrastructure. The world wide economic recession is likely to result in mining companies laying-off more workers. Poverty and unemployment levels are already so high, but people being laid off will lead to even more street children.

I want to expand our work but with our resources it's very difficult. I tried one time to open Friends of the Street Children in another town, but lack of resources stopped us.

Your commitment to street children spans grassroots work to advocacy. How did you achieve this?

One day I was called to speak on a live radio programme with politicians. I made a certain statement and said the government is not doing enough to support these communities. The president at the time was listening. He rang up the ministers for community development and social services and said: "Why is this man talking like this?" The ministers decided to organise a national symposium asked me to give a presentation on working with children. At the symposium I presented my Running Tap theory, which is about solving the community problems like HIV and unemployment which give birth to the street children. The government took it on and designed a national programme called Food Basket, to deliver food to the poor. They also created street children committees throughout the country so that so that they could fight this curse - which is fantastic work.

What now for you and Friends of the Street Children?

Our organisation has been recognised at a national and international level for its innovation.

We grow food and raise chickens and rabbits. We also train children in shoe-making, carpentry, tailoring, automotive mechanics and agriculture. When Zambian ministers and directors came to our organisation they recognised our innovation. We won Best Practice NGO in Zambia in 2006. Now two years down the line, we have won a Human Rights Award and I am really, really happy.

With this award we will be able to lobby for more resources to open other branches, and I will train more people to do street work. When I go to the street today and see what work others are doing I feel there are many gaps in our work. We need to develop better relationships with the children.

I would also be very interested to undergo more training. Save The Children have given me basic human rights training, but I feel I need to know more. Our work is about trying to restore children's lost dignity and to uphold their human rights, so I need a deeper understanding of rights, especially children's rights.