



## How did a rural South African girl end up in Europe?

*Buso Memela*

Imagine buying your mother a beautiful house — a house that she cleaned as her job! Imagine paying a flight ticket for your mother to visit your grandma from work! Well, I cannot imagine this part, because I never knew flying was 'a thing' for everyone.

My dream was to grow up and do 'cool' things for my mother and spoil her rotten.

My name is Nombuso Memela, known to most people as Buso. I'm an only child on my mother's side and have unknown siblings from my father's side. My life revolves around my family from my mother's side because I have no connection to my father's. I actually don't know any of them.

My mother was one of 4 siblings (3 sisters and a brother) and a half-brother from her father's side. She was the first born.

In 1984 my grandpa got ill (a sickness similar to stroke) and my grandma, a housewife, was his primary caregiver. This meant my mother as the first born in the family had to stop school at Form 4 (Grade 10) and work to look



after the family, becoming the breadwinner. My Grandpa passed away in March of 1992, just 3 months after I was born.

At the age of 24 my mother became a mother to all her siblings along with me and she became the head of the family. I was born on the 28th December 1991 and mostly my grandmother and aunts raised me while my mother was earning a living for us.

I had very loving parents until I was 6 years when my parents separated and I became my mother's sole daughter because that was the last time I saw my father.

With the little education my mother had, the only job she was qualified for was a domestic worker – and boy, she was good at it! I am from a rural area called Donnybrook (a village 80 kilometres southwest of Pietermaritzburg), and to find domestic work one has to go to the city. That's what my mother did and she found a job in Durban, 172 kilometres away. Transport being expensive she could not travel to and fro every day. We thus only saw her every month-end when she came home to bring us groceries and some money — and that's when we got to eat 'nice food', such as meat and eggs.

My mother's employers were fond of me. They always sent toys and children's books for me when my mother came home. These books made me the smartest kid in the Crèche. I was the one helping other kids with learning and I was number one in class.

Growing up in the rural area in a struggling family, sharing my mom with her siblings meant I could not get everything I needed or wanted as a kid. I used plastic bags for a school bag and sometimes I would walk barefoot to school in the cold. But all this made me want to go to school even more, I could see how hard my mother was trying, giving her love and all her best for the family, so I wanted to grow up, be responsible and honour her sacrifices by helping her.

On school holidays I would visit my mother at work. This is when I saw the other beautiful world out there (apart from and a contrast to the place I grew up to know — the farms). This was an amazing world, beautiful streets and nice houses and cars and stay-in dogs — I wanted to have all these when I was older.

My mother's employers had a daughter, Nikita, who was my age and we would play together. As 6 year olds, we understood each other despite speaking different languages and we had so much fun. This encounter introduced me to English. In Primary School, they taught us everything in IsiZulu — everything — even English was taught in IsiZulu. The only thing I knew in English was the

basic greetings and 'I love you', from writing my mom a Valentine's or Mother's Day card.

Even though Nikita and I played together without language difference coming in the way, I still wanted to learn English so I would try speaking to her. I picked up English from watching cartoons with her. All the fun I had with Nikita, my mother, and Nikita's family in the city made me want to help my mother change things back home. I wished so much that my grandma would experience it as well. I still do.

When I was 11 years my mother's employers left the country. They wanted my mom and me to go with them, but my mother being what she was to the family couldn't. It made sense. My mother got another job in Johannesburg and had to leave Durban. This meant we couldn't see her every month-end but every half-a-year. This was difficult and her wanting me to get a better education led to the decision of my moving with her. I was 12. My mother was very determined to do the best for me, even though she couldn't afford the schools in the city, resolute as she was, found a subsidy



to support it. I did my Grade 7 in a Model C school (a school in South Africa that used to be for white children only and is now mixed). I had to speak English but with my background, I certainly couldn't. I got bullied a lot, children made fun of me thinking I was stupid. But I was good in Math — I didn't really need English for this subject so I excelled.

Determined to prove to the kids who bullied me wrong, I studied and did my homework and continued watching cartoons and my English got better.

Even though that was my first year in an English school, I passed the exams very well and even got awards.

This made my mother proud. For High School, she got me another subsidy and I went to Princess High (another good school). Now as a teenager in a school with kids from different backgrounds I was determined to fit in, not in a regular way, but to be known as one of the smart ones. Being a 'Kitchen Girl's' (Domestic Worker) daughter isn't a cool thing but I felt fortunate. I felt fortunate because I stayed in the suburbs, it was quiet and all I had to do after school was to go home, finish my homework and learn more English. I got better at it and my excelling at school didn't go unnoticed.

At 17, I was in Matric (last level of high school). Sadly, I lost my mother that year. She passed away on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2009, the same day I started writing the mid-year Exams and to be honest, all hope was lost.

Knowing what my mother went through to get me that far I persisted and I passed my Matric.

From there on, I had to grow up and take responsibility for my life. Without any guidance, I didn't know what to do and where to go to further my education, so I took a gap year. One year turned into 2. During those years I found small jobs so I could earn some pocket money, and my grandma helped me with some of her pension money while I stayed with my aunts.

I didn't settle for these small jobs — I wanted more for myself. I did research on bursaries and scholarships and I applied to study at the University of South Africa and by God's Grace my bursary application was successful with NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme, in South Africa).

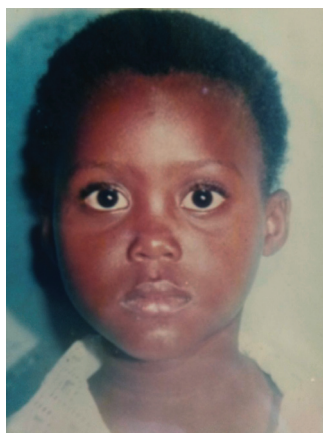
I was so grateful to have had the chance to go back to school — I worked hard and I got great marks. Because NSFAS only paid for tuition and books I didn't have spending money, so I still had to earn a living and I took up waitressing. That still was not enough — I was exploring and pushing the boundaries with how I could have and live a fulfilling life. I wanted to work with young people where motivation and inspiration was key. So in 2014, I started volunteering at Golden Youth Club (GYC), which is a youth Non-profit founded by Johannah Mahlangu. The group engages in performing arts and educational leadership projects in the community of Winterveldt and around South Africa and the world. With GYC, I could both learn and share my skills with others — with youth of a similar background (orphans or raised by single parents). I helped with project management and because I was studying IT (Information Technology) I could help technically as well.

GYC collaborates with Peerleader International (German NGO) in exchange programs and that year was my year! With the dedication I showed, GYC chose me to represent the organization in 2014/2015 and that enabled my first entry into Germany — an unimaginable journey both literally and symbolically. I lived in Germany for a year doing an Ecology program. Germany — the geographical shift opened the doors to global opportunities, experiences, professional and personal associations, lasting friendships and ties. Following that stint were travels to countries like Israel, Holland and Bosnia, learning, experiencing and inhabiting other cultures. These were all the possibilities I never thought of as a kid living in the village because I never knew what existed beyond my immediate surroundings.

I am where I am today because of the knowledge Johannah shared and the space she gave us, allowing us to grow. I used that knowledge to broaden my horizons.



Mom with Grandma and her Siblings



4-year-old Buso

Today I am 26 years with a qualification in Information Technology and I work in Filming & Television Production, having worked in more than 5 Film and TV Productions. I also have leadership skills in Youth and Community Development through my experience at GYC and Peerleader International.

My willpower to want to change how things were in the past and continue from where my mother left things off pushes me to want to learn and do more.

Love, willingness to learn and humility, to me are the key attributes to success.



For as long as I live I want to be a testament that being an orphan isn't the end of the world and that one's background doesn't determine their future as finality.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Buso Memela (26)*, is a University of South Africa IT Graduate from Donnybrook, KZN. She is caught in between IT, Film & TV Productions and being an enviro-preneur youth Activist. She defines herself as a Misfit because she hasn't found a career that has all 3 of her major expertise.