

## **Puthane**

### **'Doing hope' through music**

I'm a teacher in Mamelodi, a township in South Africa. I only started working there recently. A place that is nearly void of hope if you drive through the streets. The images of pain and poverty, hopelessness, AIDS, hunger bears testimony of the Apartheid South Africa. It pleads to be seen, to be heard, but it is as if in our New South Africa we are still blinded by so many discourses. We are not always silenced, rather hearing impaired by what is happening in our communities.

I thought I was prepared when I started working in Mamelodi. The comfort of working in other projects in disadvantaged communities gave me the idea (knowledge?) of what to expect in this community. Oh my, how wrong I have been. I was not at all prepared working there 5 days a week teaching music, 'doing hope'.

We are four white teachers that started teaching music in a black community. Most of us had a choice when we left our previous schools. Most of us accepted the work because we wanted to give to the community and because no other music teachers could be found by the education department to work in Mamelodi. But what struck me mostly in the first month were the poverty, the hunger, the need for care, and the need for hope. Giving hope? There is no way! 'Doing hope' that became our task and focus. Crying through the pain. Despairing with them, searching for a glimmer of hope.

Puthane, a 13/14 year old boy was one of my first recorder students. He came with the other 125 pupils but as some of them come only once or twice a week, he came every day. The young man that is called 'the monster' by his peers. The boy that grew too fast – I don't know why, neither does he because they can't afford to take him to a doctor. We spoke only once about this situation. He struggles to understand and speak English and I am not yet able to speak Sepedi. He told me that it creates a lot of pain in his joints and that some days he can't go to school. He spoke about his peers running away from him, being scared but also teasing him. He spoke about his family that lives far away and that he is staying with people his mom knew. I couldn't figure out why he was not living with his parents or know even if they are still alive. The way I understood it is they send him away from their community because he was not ill (AIDS?) like them and that he might have a better chance in the city.

Puthane is caring, gentle, mostly sad and quiet. But he attended regularly his classes. A reporter from the local newspaper came to take photographs for his article and Puthane was standing in the middle right in front (needless to say the children behind him are not visible in this particular photograph). And then one day I didn't see him anymore. They told me he was not at school, he was sick. I watched out for him. A couple of days later he shuffled past me on his way home. I called and asked him why he was not coming to class. I never got a response.

The next week we were handing out some food. I saw him peeking around the door. I invited him in but he declined. And then the newspaper arrived. And yes, his photograph was in the paper. Later that afternoon I saw him again peeking around the door. I asked the other young people to invite him to join us. "No, he doesn't want to come" they told me. I then asked one of them to give him one of the copies of the newspaper. "I'll push him into the class" the lad offered. "No, thank you, please give him the newspaper and tell him that he can keep it" was my reply. Five minutes later he walked into my class, holding the newspaper close to his chest. He asked if he could really keep it. "Yes, sure, it is yours" I replied. He sat there smoothing out the crinkles on the page. Staring at the photograph. I offered him another newspaper and again he smoothed out the photo and then very neatly he folded it into a small block so that he could fit it in his pocket. He showed every one he saw that afternoon the photo. Late that afternoon we had to close the roll down doors. I am too short and have a back problem and can't pull down the door. He offered to help. Puthane became the 'door keeper'. Trying to be there

first in the afternoon to unlock it and last so that through being so tall he is able to do what I can't do.

He is currently one of the furthest advanced pupils, as he practices the whole afternoon while waiting to close the door. He also teaches the young ones to play recorder and helps with the handing out of food. He is one of my students that have become my right hand in teaching in Mamelodi and 'doing hope' in the community. The last week before the school closed for holidays our violin teacher, Betsie, walked up to Puthane, thanking him for being our guardian angel. "We love you, Puthane," she said. "I know" he responded shyly, "I love you too".