

On Being My Neighbour's Keeper

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It was a task no one is prepared for; to tell three boys that their mother has just died. It was early on a Sunday morning when Moira came knocking on our back door. "Mfundisi, Sibongile passed away last night, you must come with me and tell the boys, I can't do it alone. Those boys, they only lost their father three weeks ago."

We went to their door in the rooming house where they lived next door to our home in central Pietermaritzburg. All three boys, aged 10, 12 and 19, stumbled out into the hallway, just waking up from their shared blankets on the floor. I had known these boys as neighbours, as best friends of my son, and as faithful participants in church activities. As tears crept to my eyes, I said, "Boys, there is no easy way I can say this; last night your mother died." Overwhelmed by the unfathomable future of these boys, there was nothing more I could say at that moment.

Sibongile (or Gladness, as she was also known) had worked long, hard hours as a cook in a city hotel for a number of years. Her absentee husband worked and lived in Johannesburg with a new family, and had been estranged from his wife and boys for many years. She led a life of struggle and survival that is typical of the city's underclass of working poor.

When I first met the family they were living at the upper end of Pietermaritz Street in a rooming house with 7 rooms and one common bathroom. An average of 30 persons lived in the house. The house next door contained a thriving shebeen. The rent for their 16 sq. metre room was R400, representing 50% of Sibongile's take-home pay. Electricity and water were regularly shut off by the corporation. Ever-increasing school fees and taxi fares to Northdale schools took up the bulk of her pay after rent.

In 1995 Sibongile and her boys moved into the house next door to ours, after Ubunye Coop Housing took on the management of the property. There were 7 rooms in this house but only 15 residents. No shebeen and no violence. A large common bath as well as common kitchen area. The back yard contained space for several small vegetable gardens. The rent for her 16 sq metre room was only R250 and the electricity and water stayed on.

Over the intervening years Sibongile's boys, Mandla and Sakhile, have been an integral part of our family life in the city centre. With their mother working such long hours, the younger boys spent most of their afternoons, after school to dusk, in our large backyard and garden. Meals were eaten together, toys traveled back and forth, and family celebrations (both ways) were often shared.

As time went by other neighbourhood boys came into the group; Nathan, originally from Woodlands, and Prishen, originally from Northdale. Besides playing with Hot Wheels cars, Lego and plastic swords (acquired *enmasse* at the Royal Show), the sports of choice were soccer and cricket. My son's English is a curious conglomeration of Epworth Pre-Primary nuances of English and Afrikaans, mixed with hints of English spoken by Zulu-first-language speakers acquired in an Indian-environment primary school!

Sibongile was a large woman who worked hard and without complaint. Over the last couple of years however various physical complaints had arisen - back and leg pains, violent headaches and frequent respiratory illnesses. She saw doctors and inyangas and asked for healing prayer in church services. But the inevitable followed its course in her body. A couple of months before her death she had faded to half her former size. The day of her death, she collapsed at work and Moira, a co-worker, took Sibongile to her own home where she died peacefully in the evening. Not knowing death was so close, the boys on the other side of town were not called to her side. Hence, my early morning assignment.

Now the overwhelming challenges of the immediate future were set in motion. Contacting the police mortuary, funeral homes, relatives in Durban and Nkandla; setting up the room so friends and relatives could come to pay their respects. Our church's first response was to provide food for the boys and all the relatives who would descend upon them over the next few days. The employer provided an advance on the death benefits so arrangements could be made to transport the body to Zululand. One of the leaders in our church was asked to speak at a memorial service held in the hotel where Sibongile had worked.

The next step was a family decision that the boys stay in the city rather than move out to an already over-stretched home in a rural area with unknown relatives. An aunt was sent to care for them under the responsible, but immature, direction of the oldest boy who now became the head of their household. Knowing some of the obstacles ahead, our church congregation took up a collection for the family. Enough was collected to cover the boys' school fees for the year, three months rent and groceries for several months.

Once we knew that life was settled for at least a couple of months, I began working with Ntokozo, the oldest boy, to try and get death benefits from the insurance companies. The first hurdle was the court system. We had to establish the death of both parents and place the boys in temporary guardianship of the court, so that benefits could be paid out. Since both parents were originally from the Nkandla district we were told that was the only place this matter could be dealt with. Following some obstinate questioning it was determined that the matter could be dealt with in a Maritzburg court. Then it seemed that the father's death certificate had not been signed properly by the medical officer. So auntie had to take a three-day trip (with accompanying costs) out to Nkandla to take care of that oversight.

Then the court system itself... The first challenge was to find time when a school boy could have access to the courts, since the clerks won't take new cases after 2:30 in the afternoon. Endless hours sitting on wooden benches outside offices. Then disinterested court personnel once you're inside. While Ntokozo initiated the conversation and obviously had all the relevant information, the black clerk and his assistant kept asking the white adult male in the room (myself) all the questions. The most telling question: "These children are orphans; what do they mean to you and why are you helping them?" When I informed them that they were my neighbours and that it just seemed the right thing to do, the room filled with boisterous laughter!

The magistrate's signature on the clerk's documentation took a total of 3 minutes after we had spent an hour with the clerk. However, the white male adult was given a tongue-lashing for thinking that he could push his way into this system and make waves just because of the colour of his skin. We had arrived at the magistrate's office at 4:05

and this kind of work is not done after 4:00. We apologized profusely and thanked him generously.

Now, finally, the boys could approach the two insurance companies involved and try to get their money out of them. But that's a story for another day... Suffice to say that months later some money did begin to arrive. Then auntie had to be declared legal guardian of the two younger boys so that she could apply for an orphan's grant from the Department of Welfare. This, of course, involved more standing in queues with auntie. When it came down to getting to the queue by 6:00 am for a 7:30 opening of the welfare office doors, auntie graciously suggested that she thought she could manage from here on.

There is not a neat and tidy ending to this story. The struggle continues for these young fellows. Their school in Northdale forgave their school fees for 1999 upon hearing of the loss of their mother, their only breadwinner. The church's donation then went toward payment of fees for 2000. But daily taxi fare is often not available given the subsistence income the family works with. Paying the monthly rent and putting food on the table is a cyclical problem.

If this family's story was unusual, there would be a great rallying, solutions sought and answers found. But the story is commonplace, many families throughout the city struggle to survive, to improve themselves and do as well for their children as possible with very little means. What makes the story unique for my family and I, is that these are our friends and neighbours, not some nameless people that we know nothing about. And if friends and neighbours don't rally around to help one another, there's no one else who will.