

Down's girl makes spirit soar

Jonathan Jansen | 16 March, 2011 22:32



Jonathan Jansen: I have sat in audiences where I have listened to and interacted with Edward Said, Jurgen Habermas, Oprah Winfrey, Nelson Mandela and a half-dozen Nobel Laureates in the sciences.

But never before have I heard a speech with the intelligence, insight and compassion of a Down's Syndrome girl who came to my office three days ago. This is what she said:

"As you can see I am a person with Down's Syndrome, which means that I have one extra chromosome in every cell in my body. My grandmother's friends wanted to pray for me to become 'normal' but my mother asked them rather to pray that I would receive the support to reach my full potential as a Down's Syndrome person.

"I always knew that I was different. My mother explained to me that the reason why I have more difficulty studying and doing things is because I am a person with Down's Syndrome.

"I wondered why people admire Nelson Mandela. When my mother explained that he was in jail for 27 years and stayed positive and loving, I immediately identified with him. Sometimes I feel as if I am in the jail of my own body because I cannot always say how I feel and many people talk to my mother about me, but not to me, as if I am invisible or cannot speak for myself.

"I learn new things every day and sometimes feel sorry for myself because I cannot get married or leave the house in the same way that my sisters do. I know Gustaaf, my Down's friend for the past 12 years, will not be able to look after me. He cannot look after himself.

"He cannot even send me an SMS, even though I tried to teach him one whole afternoon. So I have decided to get married in heaven one day, where we will all be the same.

"I need dreams, just the way you do. But I adjust my dreams to my abilities.

"That was one difficult thing about going to a school with only 'normal' children - you have problems fitting in. So I started to ask the boys whether they wanted my extra chromosome and, because they could not understand what I was saying, they left me alone.

"My stepfather tried to teach me to drive, but I am too short. When my feet touch the pedals, I cannot see, and when I sit on cushions, my feet cannot reach the pedals.

"I received a Grade 10 certificate before leaving Martie Du Plessis High School. In my last year at school, I received a prize for the highest marks in biology and I received the highest honour of the school for drama accomplishments on National level among 'normal' learners.

"After leaving school I went to the Motheo College, a technical college, and was also the first and only Down's Syndrome student to be accepted there.

"With the grace of our dear Lord, a lot of hard work and an ulcer because I stressed so much, I passed the N3 course, which equals 'matric', and after that I passed the N4, N5 and N6 courses. The N6 course is the highest qualification at the college. I was awarded the Education Diploma in Educare, in May 2009.

"When my mother and sister received their degrees, I started to dream about wearing a robe and mortarboard and walking across a podium. When I did eventually walk across a graduation podium all the people in the City Hall stood up for me. I was also awarded a special prize for being the first Down's student to receive a National Diploma. That was the most amazing moment of my life. I looked at all the people and saw my mother and sisters crying.

"I am so happy to work at Lettie Fouche, a special school for learners with learning problems, as an assistant in the pre-primary classes. I enjoy every day and I help the teacher to prepare her lessons and to stimulate the learners.

"Vanessa Dos Santos of Down's Syndrome South Africa asked me to 'open' the international conference for Down's Syndrome in 2012. She also asked me to be on the International Board for Down's Syndrome.

"I live among these people . me, a girl with Down's Syndrome, a condition that makes people abort their babies and lock them in institutions or at the back of their homes so others can't see them!

"May you also be blessed with happiness and a heart full of compassion for those in need."