

**Helen Fallon**, Deputy Librarian at Maynooth University meets African people living in Ireland. Through sharing stories we can reach a better understanding of each other and our hopes and dreams.

# Sharing Our Stories

*From Zimbabwe to Dublin: Thubelihle Moyo tells her family's story...*

## Early Years in Zimbabwe

**M**y name Thubelihle means 'opportunity' in my native language. I was born in Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe. I belong to the Ndebele ethnic group, who live mostly in the west and southwest of the country. Zimbabwe was known as Rhodesia before it gained independence in 1980. By the time I was born in 1997, Robert Mugabe had been president for ten years. The country is rich in natural resources including minerals and diamonds. However because of economic mismanagement, corruption and human rights violations things were very bad. My father was a secondary school teacher. My mother worked in development with NGOs. Her main work was helping people from rural areas. She worked in the distribution of food aid and projects to empower rural people. Myself and my sister Thabi who is three years older than me lived with our parents in a house just outside the city.

## High School

Thabi and I attended the Dominican Convent in Bulawayo. This was the first secondary school to be established in the city in 1895. While we weren't Catholic the school was renowned for its high quality education. Mass was celebrated at the beginning and end of term and also for commemorative events. What I valued most about my education is the inspiration I got from my peers, teachers and those students who had gone before me: this made me value education and see the importance of having a passion and the drive to succeed. While I was at high school, I began to think about studying psychology after school. I could do that at the University of Zimbabwe, or in South Africa, where my grandparents and my aunt lived. I enjoyed my school years. I liked sports and played basketball and soccer and went to watch swimming galas.

## Dangerous Place

However at high school, life got more difficult. School fees were increasing, salaries weren't keeping pace with inflation, there was a sense of danger all around. Everybody seemed to be against Mugabe's government. We were warned to be careful. For example, when we talked to relatives in England, we couldn't tell them what was happening, as people were listening in on phone calls. My mother, Qonda Moyo, spoke out about how aid was going to government supporters and not necessarily where it was needed most. After she was threatened my parents made a plan to leave the country. I don't know why she choose Ireland. I knew little about the place when she, Thabi and I left for Ireland in April 2016. We travelled via South Africa – where my father remained – and flew from there to Dubai and on to Ireland.

*When I was at high school, things got more difficult. School fees were increasing; salaries weren't keeping pace with inflation; there was a sense of danger all around. Everybody seemed to be against Mugabe's government. We were warned to be careful.*

## Direct Provision

As soon as we arrived in Dublin we sought asylum. We were taken first to a reception centre in Finglas and then after one month were transferred to a direct provision centre in Monaghan. The centre, which housed hundreds, was in an old agricultural college just outside the town. All that summer there was nothing much to do. Sometimes we went into Monaghan town on a bus that was provided by the centre. The town people weren't used to black people and used to stare at us. I joined the public library in the town and also used the internet there. I think my impression of the western world had been shaped by television back home. I thought everything would be very modern and was surprised there were no skyscrapers and that there were boarded up houses and homeless people. Having grown up in a city, and seeing American cities on TV, I had little idea of what rural places in Ireland or other parts of Europe, might be like. I was really struck



**Thubelihle Moyo from Zimbabwe at a scholarship awards ceremony in University College Dublin.**

by the long evenings. I'd heard that it could be bright until 10 o'clock but couldn't imagine it until that summer. Back home it gets dark much earlier. When it's summer here it's winter in Zimbabwe, but this summer was a lot colder than our winter!

### Education

In September the three of us started FETAC programmes in the Cavan Institute. I studied psychology and social science, my sister studied tourism, and Mum did nursing. We went over on the bus from Monaghan to Cavan every day. Going to the course each day gave us a sense of purpose.

Before the year-long course was finished my mother became ill. She needed to attend the cancer unit in the Mater Hospital, Dublin. We were transferred to another Direct Provision centre in Dublin. This was a self-catering unit and was much better as we could make our own meals. We bought food in Moore Street – maize meal to make a porridge to have with stew, okra, rice, corn on the cob and potatoes. It was challenging though as Thabi and I now had to travel to Cavan five days a week to attend class. We left home at 6 a.m. and got back around 8 or 9 at night.

After I finished that course I got a place on another FETAC course in Ballsbridge on Community Development. Thabi began an access foundation programme at the Technological University Dublin. My class was very diverse with lots of other African people. That was nice as I didn't feel I stood out so much. I enjoyed visits we

*I think my impression of the western world had been shaped by television back home. I thought everything would be very modern and was surprised there were no skyscrapers and that there were boarded-up houses and homeless people. Having grown up in a city, and seeing American cities on TV, I didn't have a strong sense of what rural places in Ireland or other parts of Europe, might be like.*

made to youth resource centres to see lots of different projects to engage youth, who might otherwise be at risk from drugs and underage drinking. I spoke to the guidance counsellor, who explained that the course was a pathway to undertaking a sociology degree in UCD. That year, 2017, we were granted asylum, so I was excited by the possibilities that offered. Sadly, my mother's battle with cancer, was continuing.

### University College Dublin

UCD is a university of sanctuary and there are scholarships specifically for refugee and asylum seekers. I was fortunate to get a scholarship. I enrolled for Sociology and Social Science in 2018. I started in late September and in November my mum died. She was really happy to know that Thabi and I were in University. Thabi studies tourism in Technology University of Dublin. My father had come to Ireland from South Africa shortly before Mum died. The three of us live in Raheny and I take the Dart (train) to UCD. I have just finished second year at college. I really enjoy the research part of the course. I love to read and find out about Ireland and also find out about the various theories that explore how society is shaped. The society here is very different from back home in Zimbabwe. Here the focus is on being independent, there we had a type of collective consciousness, with a very strong emphasis on the family and community and your role in it.

I'd like to study more, maybe do a Masters degree and like my mother, work in NGOs and empower the most vulnerable in society by making the world a better place for everyone regardless of their race, ethnicity, background or socio-economic status. I'd like to do this in Ireland and maybe Africa too. My studies and life so far have shown me we need to have a more equal society and policies that help people who are struggling. ■