

# NEVERMIND THE SETBACK

**HOW DO YOU KEEP FIGHTING WHEN YOU'VE LOST A BATTLE? WE HAVE TWO ALTERNATIVES, ONE TO GIVE UP AND TWO TO FIND A WAY TO KEEP GOING.**

**T**resia Haiduwa is one woman who had been set back quite a few steps. Most of us know chickenpox as the itchy condition that sees us treated with white or creamish ointment and then eventually disappears. Tresia was, however, left with a hearing impairment at the age of three when she contracted chickenpox. Living in the village of Omalyata in the Ohangwena region, there was no medical treatment for her.

The chickenpox virus can cause the loss of hearing in both adults and children. A child who contracts chickenpox is at a higher risk of an ear infection (although it's very rare). If not treated early or with the right medication the virus affects certain nerves, which can leave permanent damage.

Tresia had just begun speaking when she lost her hearing. Her parents kept on teaching her to speak but it became increasingly difficult. It would be about a decade later before she started speaking. She went from being a hearing little girl to one with no ability to hear at all. In a world filled with silence, she learned to lip-read from an early age.

As is common in many communities, differently abled children are kept at home away from school. The reason for this is often the lack of information or resources on the part of parents to know that there is help for their children. Because of her hearing loss this was Tresia's loss until the age of twelve when she started school.

Tresia learned that every challenge helps us discover something new about ourselves and is an opportunity to invent a new way to solve our problems. By becoming deaf following her illness she found herself before the option to give up or catch up – albeit rather late.

She went to the Eluwa Special School for sight and hearing-impaired children. It was here, under teacher Eva Shakuujungwa that Tresia learned to read and write. She also taught Tresia to speak orally after receiving an ear piece. According to Tresia, however, failed Grade 10 but refused to give up. She would eventually finish school at the age of 22. She would simply try and try until she succeeded. A simple ambition drove her, the ambition to assist fellow deaf members in her community.

Crafts were her first option to keep herself busy, so she worked on projects with sight-impaired women. Tresia eventually learned to do hair. In the end she worked her way up to the point where she owned her own hair salon.

Tresia's advice is, "whenever you face a wall of difficulty and you don't know how to figure things out, start with what you can do. What skills and talents do you have?" Tresia reminds us that our answers are sometimes right there in our hands.

She says being deaf makes the struggle even harder, but you need to keep encouraging yourself until you achieve your goals. She wisely points out how often you will be your only cheerleader.

Her positive attitude and perseverance saw her reach one of her biggest dreams. In 2005 CLaSH, the Association for Children with Language, Speech and Hearing Impairments supported a parents' initiative at Eenhana that had started from a group of parents with deaf children. Tresia initially became the sign language instructor for the parents' meetings. In May of the following year, Tresia became the teacher and matron for these children when the Eenhana Town Council had allocated a plot and the parents had built a zinc house.

Tresia's journey to become an accredited teacher began with CLaSH. They invited her to the pre-school unit in Windhoek for some basic in-service training. In April 2009, the plot with the zinc house and another pre-fab building which CLaSH had acquired were officially handed over to the Ministry of Education, according to Heide Beinhauer. The place was then already called Usko Nghaamwa Pre-School due to the generous support from Ohangwena's governor Usko Nghaamwa. Since becoming a government institution, Tresia required formal qualifications to continue teaching. She was initially appointed as matron, but in 2011, she was allowed to enroll at the Headstart Montessori Teacher Training College at Walvis Bay. Over five years of dedication and support from CLaSH enabled Tresia to finish her studies in December 2016.

As of 2017, Tresia's position at Usko Nghaamwa Special School was adjusted from matron to pre-primary teacher and since January that year she teaches the pre-primary class at the school.

Tresia had also married and is the mother of a hearing daughter. Even though her daughter can speak and hear, she is fluent in sign language. Tresia believes that every child, deaf or hearing, should be exposed to sign language, because exposing our children to various languages makes them adaptable to those who are different from them.

Tresia's story of overcoming her obstacles to become the only deaf female teacher at her school is encouraging. It is, however, not okay for so many disabled children in our communities to be kept away from school and learning opportunities.

We can do better as a nation. The nurturing of children should go beyond that of our own families only. We should tirelessly advocate interventions, policies and investments that give every child a chance to succeed in life.

Let us build a society in which life and education is given a fair chance to the hearing, the deaf, able and disabled people alike. Let us build a world in which life is not too difficult for those left a few steps behind, in fact let us bridge the gap where possible.

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