At first glance you would think that the diminutive Siatra Msandu is a shy and quiet young lady who would be content to let others do the talking. But, you would be dead wrong. Siatra is a firebrand activist, whose special brand of storytelling activism has helped her blaze her own trail, while dedicating herself to helping others. “If you are going to be respected as an activist, you have to try and put yourself into the situation that they are experiencing or you draw upon your own personal experiences, you can then develop common ground as a starting point.” Siatra believes that when you are authentic and relatable, it means that you have a better chance of changing someone’s attitudes and behaviour. She says that she has learnt from mentors and even current colleagues, the importance of paying attention to small details when speaking or engaging with people. “I find out so much from the small things that I pick up when I’m talking to someone. It can be really useful in unexpected ways and teaches you a lot about the person you are dealing with.”

Looking back to where it all started, it’s easy to see why Siatra was drawn to the UNICEF One Minute Movie Jr initiative that she joined when she was 15-years-old. Prior to this she had become involved in the Junior Council, a local governance platform for children that focused on child rights, where she was promoted to the position of Junior Public Relations officer. After some time in the council, Siatra decided that she needed to address issues that young people were experiencing, so she wrote an opinion editorial which she sent to the Sunday Mail, one of Zimbabwe’s leading Sunday publications. So impressed by her piece was the newspaper’s editor, that he promptly nominated her to participate in advocacy training being offered by UNICEF at the time. “UNICEF was my dream organisation and I was so humbled to be given the opportunity to participate in their training on how to make a film in one minute.” Recalling the theme as if it was yesterday, I submitted my own video under the theme, ‘Where I am in Time and Place’, Siatra says that the experience taught her to not only pay attention to details, but importantly for her, it was the first time she was asked to internally reflect on who she was and what ‘her season was’ in that moment. “A lot of it is about learning self-care and awareness as a young person. Which is something we don’t teach or indeed ask young people to do.” She says that a young person of 10, 12 or 15 years of age has developed their own lived experiences which are unique to them and these experiences should not be disregarded by the old adage that ‘children have not experienced enough’ in the world to add value. The experiences of children and young people is valuable.

After that Siatra was selected to represent Africa, as one of six other young people from across the globe and travelled to Germany through the Terre des Hommes (TDH) Germany organisation to discuss the real life impact of the SDGs, what the development goals meant in real terms for children across the world. “We arrived at the height of winter in 2017 and I remember seeing snow for the first time, being amazed at how advanced the technology was compared to back home, how everything seemed to work better at first glance.” But, here is where the awe stopped, Siatra says that she and her companions were exposed to intentional and unintentional racism by the very same young people that they were meant to engage and exchange their experiences with. She recalls being asked to take out her braids so that they could ‘feel and touch the texture of a black person’s hair’, she was asked how come she was able to speak ‘such good English’, that people like her from third world countries would not ‘even know what good chocolate would taste like’ or indeed ever get to eat chocolate, so ‘poor you’. The two young Hindu kids who were part of her group were given a cow that had its tail and horns cut off, intentionally desecrating something sacred in their culture. It was at that moment that Siatra says she became angry and decided that enough was enough and she and the
other ‘poor kids from the poor parts of the world’ were going to stand in their own personal power and strength and not be bullied just because their lived realities were different to those of the kids in Germany. “I had a few minutes for my presentation, but I knew that it needed to make an impact, to make them understand that everything that they took for granted, like a warm shower, being able to access good food at any time, the opportunity to select which secondary school you wanted to go to because you had choices, especially if you were a girl had been handed to them on a silver platter and they were not even aware how different the lived realities of other young boys and girls were across the world.” She says that she also shared the very real challenges that girls who experience their period for the first time, often spoil their dresses because they have to make a sanitary pad last the whole day, because they can only afford one packet of sanitary pads for their period, sometimes not even a whole pack. “When I was speaking I had a sense of power. I instinctively knew that it was my only moment to shine.” And the result of this harsh honesty and telling them not to feel sorry for her, sparked a change in the attitudes and behaviour of the youngsters who at the time were considered to be the ‘worst class’ in the school. Siatra says that they apologised for their behaviour and even approached the school principal to say that they would work harder to become better students. This is when Siatra says that she understood just how powerful your voice and your experience as a young person from Africa can be. That you don’t have to feel that you are second best, that you and your experiences have value and by sharing them can lead to meaningful change in the lives of other people that you engage with. She wanted to create this impactful change back at home.

Upon her return Siatra went back home to Norton, the small fishing town where she says that it was common place that for some girls to never leave a trace of how their story ended or continued beyond when you knew them. “So you would have young girls falling pregnant, dropping out of school, being married off early to rather advance their brothers’ education and prospects. I had to do something.” Drawing on her experiences from Junior Council, she knew that this would be a good platform to empower young girls like herself. The challenge however was that it was not functioning in the correct way which meant that those who were not part of the select few were never going to be afforded to get the opportunities she did. After two hard years of lobbying and challenging the current system, with the firm backing of the local parents, Siatra says they succeeded in ensuring that the cohort of junior councillors that she had been working with were able to fully benefit from the system. Since then the group that she helped foster and grow have gone onto become incredible activists and changemakers themselves. “I am so proud of the way in which they have grown and become amazing young women and men who have taken up leadership positions across various networks in Zimbabwe.” One stand out, is the 21-year old Pritchard Paradzayi who Siatra says has really used the lessons she taught him about being true to himself, standing in his power and leveraging the network of other young activists around him. Pritchard is part of the university’s student representative council where he studies and he is challenging the political system to change if for the better for his and the next generation. He has strong ideas on what needs to change and how the young people in Zimbabwe will help to make that change.

Siatra understands just how important mentors are for young people. She says that she has been blessed to have a whole network of mentors who have come along just at the moment when she needed them. And who then in turn introduced her to a new mentor when they felt that she had learnt all she could from them and was able to take the next step of her personal development journey. Some of these include Joseph Tonderai Kauzani, who opened the door for
her at junior council to Dr. Hillary Musarurwa of Penya (Practical Empowerment and Network Youth Association) whose organisations works in partnership with Roots Africa, a local NGO focusing on empowering young women and girls by opening up pathways to education and entrepreneur funding, who was a lifeline during the upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic. “I did not realise the impact that Dr. Hillary would have in my life when I met him just before the pandemic, but he was instrumental in helping me towards my journey as a counsellor. He provided funds for me to undertake online training in Problem Solving being offered by the Friendship Bench which led me to volunteering as a counsellor during Covid.” Dr. Hillary, as he calls him, also assisted with additional training on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which Siatra puts to good use in her daily work at Roots Africa. “Yes, I am now employed full time by Roots thanks to Dr. Hillary who introduced me to Beatrice Savadye, the founder of Roots Africa.”

The organisation also forms part of the government’s Covid-19 Response Task Force and has helped with food distribution amongst other vital necessities during the pandemic. Beatrice has joined Siatra’s network of mentors, along with her colleague Junior Gambura, who she says has taught her to become even more aware of the small things when she is talking to or counselling people. “Junior has also helped me adapt to doing things in a different way and take a leap of faith to start afresh with something new. It’s scary and exciting at the same time.”

Looking ahead the future is anything but staid for this young lady. “With all the humility of my experiences, combined with the valuable lessons from my mentors and my own lessons shared with those that I have helped mentor, I have realised that there are still gaps that need to be filled if we are going to really provide the assistance that young people need to develop.” Siatra says that when young people are starting out they encounter a mountain of challenges, from mentorship, to funding, to having the actual tools that they might need to grow and take their learning and development to the next step. “The transitioning into different development stages is where many young people who might not have open doors seem to falter. So for example they might want to be a great musician or artist or speaker or business person, but they just don’t have the access to these worlds or opportunities which would give them valuable lessons and experiences in the fields that interest them. I want to create a shared platform of opportunity to these experiences and life lessons. I’m still working out what this platform will look like and how it operate, but one thing I know for sure, is that young people need to be given the opportunity to figure out what they are interested in and what they want to be, before it’s too late. I want them to find their purpose, explore who they are and then my platform will connect them to the vision bearers and networks that can build their futures.” She says that the opportunity will not be handed to them on a silver platter, that they will have to work for it and in the end they will appreciate and value their rewards more because they have invested in themselves and their futures.”

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