

Odwa Gogwana – One day you will change your community

Good day ladies and gentlemen. Yes indeed, “zwart is mooi.”¹ My name is Odwa Gogwana. I was born and raised in a place called Khayelitsha in Cape Town. I lived with my four brothers and my two sisters.

The day before my mother passed away, she was sitting on her bed and I was playing soccer outside, because soccer is everything in my heart. She looked out the window and shouted: ‘Odwa come here.’ I was like: “no mother, I am still playing.” Because when you are a child, the thing you want to do most is be around the others. When I went to my mom, she said Odwa, quickly go to the shop and buy me a Med-Lemon.² Maybe I took ten minutes to come back. She prepared the Med-Lemon and just before I went out again she said: “child, my last one, keep on doing what you do.”

Only five minutes later, I saw cars leaving my house, one of them driven by my brother. I went to my mom’s room. She was not there. Then I started to cry. I suddenly understood that my mom would not be coming back. I was only seven years old! I started to think about my father. He died when I was three years old. It is funny how the only memory that I have from my father is when he was arguing with my mother. My mother threw a spoon at him. I sat alone there, crying and then my big brother just gave me a slap. He said: “don’t do that. Don’t cry. Be a man.” Then I asked myself how can I be a man at my age? After a few hours we got a call from Victoria hospital: Odwa, your mom has passed away. And I just went outside to play soccer, playing soccer alone, crying, crying.

Actually, you need a mother in this big world of ours. Losing her was very painful. When my bigger brother was stabbed and passed away only two years later, I was left alone. I started to lose faith in my dreams. I stopped going to school. I started to use drugs, heavy drugs, every day. Sitting alone, every second. After a while I became a gangster. People used to call me ‘the Notorious One’. The funny thing is that while I was a gangster I had a lot of girls. They loved me for it. I changed the way I walk and they were right behind me, screaming “Odwa, Odwa”.

I moved to Hout Bay³ to stay with my sister. Using drugs, I lived in my own world, the world that has no light. It was black. I only had negativity on my mind. So, I did things that I regret doing.

I know how it feels to lose brothers that are close to you. I lost three of my friends. They were stabbed. I know how it feels to touch someone’s blood. I have touched so much blood in my life. I have done things that I never thought I could do. I have caused pain in people’s lives, just because I hated them, because they were different, because they were better than me. I broke into people’s houses because I needed money, because I needed clothes to wear. I spent days sleeping outside, cold nights, for I had nowhere to go. I had to hustle. I had to live. I had to make something out of my life.

What I want to say is: you never know what might happen tomorrow. I have also lost blood. In 2010 I was stabbed with a knife by more than thirty people. I saw them coming. People were screaming and saying: “Odwa, run away, they are coming for you.” But a gangster never runs away. Even if there are twenty or thousand people and you die, you take one of them with you to the grave. They attacked me and did all they wanted to do to my body. It is full of scratches, full of aches, but the marks on my body represent my past, when life tried to break me down and failed.

I spent a month in hospital. My teacher came to visit me and said: “Odwa, why are you alive?” I was angry. “How can you ask me that question? Did you want me to die teacher?” And then she said: “no, I am just asking you a question. Maybe God believes in you. He knows that one day you will become a leader. You will change your community. You will become a role model in children’s lives.” Then she just left me there, alone in hospital. Next to me there was another guy I didn’t even know. He just said: “hey boy, you are great.” I asked him: “great in what?” “You are great in everything.” The next day I woke up in hospital and they said this guy passed away.

The stabbing was a wake-up call for me. I started to train hard in hospital. The doctors had told me that maybe I would be released from hospital in three months. But they had to discharge me just after three weeks. Being in hospital gave me time to think about my life, where I wanted to go and how I could do it. The things I have done, I regret them, but I cannot change my past. The only thing I can change is my future. I had to believe that failure is a mind-set and not a given. I grew up in front of people who had everything in life, while I had nothing in life. Going to school without proper shoes,

¹ Before Odwa’s speech Dutch-Afghan rapper Massih Hutak performed amongst other songs his ‘Zwart is Mooi’ (Black is beautiful).

² A medicine for amongst other things the flu.

³ Small town south of Cape Town.

never having had the luxury of rich parents. I never had the luck to go to a private school. And I never chose for my family to be poor. But if I allowed myself to die poor that would be my choice. So, I convinced myself that everything in life is possible. I had to believe in myself. I had to unleash the beast inside my heart.

Where I come from, everyone is just hustling. No matter how you are hustling, whether it is in a good way or a bad way, you just want to live. You just want to make something of your life. In my family, I was the first to graduate high school and I told myself I would be the breadwinner.

I have to change people's lives. After changing my life at school, I became a deputy head boy. I started to achieve great things because I figured out that as we are young adults we focussed too much on what is happening from the neck down, forgetting that everything starts from the brain. The body has limitations but the mind has not. So, I kept my focus. I had the lion attitude, because my attitude is everything. My attitude determines my altitude.

As I am where I am now because of hard work, I decided to write a letter to *hard work*:

"Dear hard work, I used to hate you. When you called my name, I quickly ran away. When you influenced others to talk to me, I quickly made excuses so that I can get away from you, afraid to fail. So, I didn't even try to work hard.

I was afraid of your name. Who do you think you are, making me afraid of who you are? I take one step at a time and you are still ahead of me, a reflection in the mirror, a shadow behind me, sweat in my face and tears in my eyes, but I keep on going because I heard you tell no lies. You asked the poor and the rich: "Is there anything that you can do?" You have turned the poor into rich.

Now look at me. You made me who I am today. Because of you I have this never giving up, never losing attitude. Quitting? That is not in my vocabulary. The word impossible does not exist in my life. I keep going. When others quit, I keep on going. When they sleep I work harder, because I believe that I am a lion.

People at school used to compare me: "Odwa, you are a leader. You will be the next Mr. Mmusi Maimane. You will be the next Mr. Nelson Mandela." I just tell them: "no, I will be the next Odwa."

When I tell them about my dreams and they laugh at me, I make sure I laugh last. I chase my dream and no one else's. It is me against the work you have put on me and against the world. There is no losing. I will not lose. I came this far and I am not stopping now.

Oh hard work, my mother was right about you. You do pay off. I love you for that. I am no longer hiding from you. Actually, I am waiting for you."

Growing up, I had a lot of questions. Now I want to conclude with a question for you, Mr. Maimane: How can you convince the upcoming generation that education is the key to success, while we have got poor graduates and rich criminals?

Ladies and gentlemen, I, Odwa Gogwana, want to tell you that despite all that you go through in life, just believe in yourself and everything is possible. Thank you.