

*“If AIDS doesn’t kill me, I want to be a teacher”*

“I knew right away, my life was never going to be the same”, is a cliché that we hear when one’s path is crossed by something or someone. When I met Ruva, my spirit confirmed that cliché for me. Seating at one of the run-down desks in the classroom with her head to the side and halfway facing down, almost so as not to be noticed, Ruva caught my attention. I had asked the kids to write down their dreams on paper and to include a list of the things they would like me to bring them next time I am visiting. For some of us ‘dream lists’ come easily and we pretty much know what we want when someone makes such a request, but for the many children I came across in all the schools I visited, you might as well have been speaking a foreign language. “Write down your dreams”, inspired by scripture – Habakkuk 2 vs 2, “And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make *it* plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it.” Visit our blog to learn more about that experience.

Ruva, shy and unassuming, is 10 years old and in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at Chamukwenjera Primary School. She is an only child who lives with her grandmother, Mbuya<sup>1</sup> Matombo. Mbuya Matombo, in her late 70s, is the head of household and only care giver to 5 other children ranging between 10 and 15. Mbuya Matombo lost three of her children to HIV/AIDS within the past 7 years. Ruva’s mother passed away in 2008; that is when she was enrolled in our *Precious Stones* program. So when I ask Ruva what she wants to be when she grows up, she looks me straight in the eye and says in almost a whisper and says, “If AIDS doesn’t kill me, I want to be a teacher”. Even I wasn’t prepared for that response. There is nothing, save her small frame, that gives you the inclination that this sweet young girl is HIV positive. Ruva’s condition is a result of mother-to-child transmission. I fought very hard not to choke as I told her that she will be a great teacher one day as long as she continues to work hard. Her teacher then walks over and proudly announces that Ruva has been top of her class three years in a row.

It is interesting, going from school to school I hear teachers comment about the intelligence of the children whose immune system has been compromised by HIV. It seems as if they somehow compensate for their most likely short lives. Ruva, loves to read but has never owned a book. Her favorite subjects are English, Maths and Content (Social Studies). She supposed to be on Antiretroviral (ARVs) for her illness but the grandmother cannot always afford the \$2 needed to pay the doctor who prescribes the free meds. She is lucky if she get to see the doctor once a year.

Ruva’s Typical Day: Her day starts at 4AM when she and her cousins walk a total of 4 miles to fetch water from an unprotected well for their grandmother to use during the day while they are at school. Some of the water is used to bath and if they have enough meal they make porridge then get ready for school. They walk about 5 miles to school for 7:30AM start. School ends at 1PM followed by afternoon activities like tending to the school garden, cleaning classrooms, sweeping the school yard and maybe a little sport. The younger children usually finish earlier than the older children so they have play time till the older ones are ready then they all walk home together. When they get home chores await them, including water run to the well. As grandmother and the older child prepare dinner, the other children do their homework, under candlelight or using light from the fire. After dinner they may sit around the fire listening to grandmother’s stories. Bedtime is usually around 9 or 10.

Ruva dreams of being a teacher and with your help, I believe she can fulfill this dream and more. You can make a difference in Ruva’s life by sponsoring her educational costs for \$5/month; guarantee her at least 2 meals a day at \$10/month and/or assist with her medical needs at \$12/month for her quarterly visits to the local hospital for checkups, free ARVs and transportation. Thank you for helping Ruva realize her dream.

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<sup>1</sup> Mbuya is Grandmother in Shona.