**AN AFRICAN EXPERIENCE OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT**

**– KHENSANI MOKHARI**

Many perceive visual impairment as a disability, misfortune or even a curse. In my specific case there is even a hint of witchcraft...

I was the Cinderella of my community in Diepsloot, Soweto, who had made it to the most prestigious school for girls in South Africa: the Oprah Winfrey Academy for Girls. I could already visualise myself studying overseas at the university of my choice and pursuing any career that my heart desired. Then my world came tumbling down at the age of 15. I know that I lost most of my sight as a result of a brain tumour, but many in my African community believe that I have been cursed by someone who was jealous of my success and bright future.

This is the tragic reality of many African people who live with disabilities, whether it is visual impairment, albinism or any other form of physical or mental challenge: an even greater burden is the superstitious perception that your condition is a result of wrongdoing – either by you, your family or someone who is jealous of you.

However, I see my condition as a key that unlocked my mind to the endless qualities that lay hidden within me.

Of course I fully agree that life is difficult for visually impaired individuals. I can surely bear testimony to the many physical and psychological obstacles that I now have to deal with on a daily basis. When I was a perfectly sighted citizen of Planet Normal, everyone was frank and even blunt with me. However, this miraculously changed immediately after my diagnosis with tuberous sclerosis. Everyone at home and at the mainstream school feels the need to be extra nice and extremely cautious in my presence. The reason why I do not like it, it because people treat me as if I suffer from some form of emotional impairment, which is obviously not the case.

Another disadvantage of my condition is that those with normal eyesight tend to think that if you are visually impaired, you are also deaf and dumb. More often than not I have people being selective about what they discuss around me, as it may not “accommodate my condition”. Some people even go as far as speaking slowly and loudly, even though my hearing has greatly improved since I became more dependent on my other senses.

The sudden realisation that I do not really have many career options to choose from, also bothers me a lot. I am still an ambitious young lady, but now I have to be realistic about my condition. I can no longer become a brain surgeon or civil engineer. But I can touch people’s lives in a different way because I have discovered qualities that I would never have had in my previous life. I might have lost my sight, even my place in the school of my dreams, but I have gained compassion, wisdom, perseverance, self-confidence and gratitude for what I DO have: LIFE!! I now have the ability to look beyond physical sight and to see with my heart, to make a real difference in others’ lives. I have discovered my true self.