

Success stories from Mosaic

Narrated by Kumbirayishe Chitenderu

Based on interviews by herself, Irene Smouter and Emma Backe

1. No Shrinking Back (Charlene)	2
2. Free at last	4
3. The compassionate listener (Sikelelwa)	6
4. I can do something about it	8
5. Kutlwano	10
6. Kristine	12
7. Annexure: Notes from Mitchell's Plain Focus group	13

**The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project
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No Shrinking Back

Interview and narrative by Irene Smouter and Kumbirayishe Chitenderu
Wynberg, Cape Town, Western Cape - 29 June, 2021

Charlene Williams is a striking woman with beautiful eyes. But her voice, though clear is often on the verge of breaking when telling her story. “I tend to cry a lot” is a disclaimer that she gives from the very beginning. One could easily mistake this emotion for weakness, but for Charlene, it is more a willingness to show her vulnerability, that this is her story and she will no longer shrink away from it.

Charlene resides in Mitchel’s plain with her husband of 24 years. When talking about who she was before marriage, Charlene recalls how her upbringing may have contributed to her landing in a dysfunctional relationship:

“I grew up literally without a mum, alcoholic dad and my sister. So school and work was tough. I literally started working when I was twelve because I needed to support myself. I met my husband when I was 16, started dating him when I was 17, fell pregnant at 19. I had my daughter when I was 20 and got married at 20.”

As their young relationship speedily progressed, the abuse became more apparent. Charlene’s husband became physically, verbally, emotionally and financially abusive. It only got worse as their daughter grew older. Her husband felt that Charlene was no longer paying him enough attention. Charlene comments on why this might have been:

*“As a human being I don’t think he’s a complete piece of s***, but as a father and as a husband I don’t think he is...he was mature enough to deal with it even though he’s older than me.”*

Amid the abuse there was infidelity on her husband’s part and what she calls a lot of forgiving on her end.

Things got to a head when Charlene’s husband severely wounded her and landed her in hospital ten years ago. He was arrested for the assault and the conditions of his release included mandatory counselling at MOSAIC. For a time, this seemed to work. Both Charlene and her daughter experienced a calmer side of his nature. But this didn’t last.

With a sigh, Charlene shares how the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of 2020 escalated the tension in her home. Charlene’s husband lost his job in the tourism industry and her father, also an alcoholic was living with them. The two men were constantly at loggerheads, leaving Charlene in the middle.

After Charlene’s father decided to leave her residence, Charlene felt devastated and broken by the unpleasant situation and sought refuge at MOSAIC. This time it was about finding her voice and strength.

Coming to Mosaic started a new chapter in Charlene's life. From the moment she walked in she felt at home. She appreciates the smiles she always receives from staff every time she visits the centre. It also started an eye-opening journey of discovery for her.

She recalls how her counsellor once asked her who she was in a session. Charlene couldn't quite answer the question. Here she was, a woman who couldn't even acknowledge herself in the mirror, let alone answer such a deeply searching question.

Over the sessions, however, she's learned to find her voice in her relationship. As part of an assignment, Charlene's counsellor asked her to write a letter to her husband, telling him what his abuse has done to her over the years. The result has been a welcome surprise to her:

"He made me feel seen. Like for the first time, he was actually not hearing my words, but hearing my heart. And since that conversation, he hasn't said anything about it, but everything he's done, up until right this moment, has been to show me that he heard me."

She admits that she isn't ready to throw away her 24 years of marriage, and is hoping that through her new found communication skills they can build this relationship into something better and stronger. She's learned that she can no longer shrink back in his presence but needs to continue being honest about how she feels. She's now "brutally" honest with everyone, she chuckles.

There have been more positive changes in Charlene's life. Her husband has started stepping up to the plate and working with her in the marriage. For example they now share their bills and expenses evenly, she doesn't have to do the lion's share anymore. Furthermore, she explains that Mosaic gave her tools to deal with the communication issues in their relationship. She used to step back and be silent to not escalate an argument and to protect her daughter. However, now she has gained a renewed insight that sometimes stepping back is not necessarily a bad thing, it can also be good to take a step back, take a minute and readdress the issue in a different way.

What's her advice for women feeling trapped in similar situations?

"Don't be scared, don't be embarrassed, you have nothing to be ashamed of, absolutely nothing. You came into this world with a purpose, you came into this world with a light, and if someone is taking that light away from you, you got to say no. You got to say stop. You love me for a reason, you saw me for a reason, so don't change that. So if someone needs help, go find it."

Free at last

Interview and narrative by Kumbirayishe Chitenderu and Irene Smouter
Wynberg, Southern suburbs, Cape Town - 24 June 2021

Charmaine is a vivacious mother of three who is advancing her career in Financial accounting. She speaks with the certainty of a woman who knows the power of her story even though it's still being written.

Perhaps it can be said that Charmaine's journey to freedom, though she couldn't have imagined it started with some world unending news a couple of years ago. She accidentally found out that the man she thought was her father wasn't her biological father and that the man she'd always believed was her uncle, her father's older brother, was her biological father. This knowledge coupled with the abuse she had faced for six years at the hands of her second husband was too great an emotional burden to bear.

The abuse she suffered at the hands of this man started off as emotional, then it turned physical. The abuse was also spiritual. She hoped it would get better but it didn't. At one point she thought it must have been because she had fallen pregnant with their son. He came as a surprise because they had both decided that they didn't need to have more children, they already had kids from their previous marriages. She kept finding excuses for his behaviour until one day she had the courage to have him arrested and step away from the marriage.

Charmaine reached a point where she hit a number of "brick walls and stumbling blocks" in her life and relationships. She was literally just going through the motions and finding her identity in the roles she played as a mother and career woman.

Finally, Charmaine heard about MOSAIC through a contact from her daughter who works for Durban Social Development (DSD), a MOSAIC affiliated organisation. She came to the centre after seeking help in therapy sessions that, in her experienced hadn't helped her or her family much:

"I've been to therapy, I've paid thousands of rands and none of it helped. I've done it for three years...If I'm brutally honest, we need more selfless people. When you go to a therapy it's about the time and can you pay your bill."

Charmaine has now been single for five years, and she still doesn't feel she's had enough time to heal.

However, her short experience at MOSAIC has been nothing short of a spiritual and emotional awakening, miraculous. Charmaine realises that this is only the beginning of her healing journey, she's only at the start but the change has already been so remarkable. For the first time she was able to recognise that the abuse she faced and the family pain she felt was not her fault.

"The joy of coming here as well is that I've reached a stage where I realised that it wasn't my fault and that was a breakthrough. That is my biggest breakthrough."

There have been several other breakthroughs for Charmaine too: She's now able to have a more open and transparent relationship with her children, one that doesn't feel forced but in which they are able to genuinely laugh together. She's been able to recognise that even though her ex-husband infected her with HIV it's not her death sentence.

One thing Charmaine especially appreciates about MOSAIC is that it doesn't matter what one's social standing is, everyone is accepted and welcome. She's especially grateful for her counsellor who has helped her work through the baggage she'd been carrying for so long and has given her courage to face her giants one at a time. She especially is grateful that through MOSAIC she now has a voice, not necessarily one for protest or publicly tearing down the powers that be, but one that can allow her to speak life into her own situation on a daily basis.

"I got a voice that says I can speak life into my own situation and maybe into someone else's situation later."

She's hopeful and encouraged that the future is brighter for her and her family because she no longer has to live "hostage" to her pain, but can reclaim the power to grow and move forward from her past trauma.

The compassionate listener

Interview and narrative by Kumbirayishe Chitenderu and Irene Smouter
Wynberg, Southern Suburbs, Cape Town - 24 June 2021

Sikelelwa Mahlasela has been working at MOSAIC for over two decades now. What started off as a volunteering position with a group of women in her township, educating women on domestic violence and abuse ended up becoming a full-time job as a counsellor at the now fully formed MOSAIC more than thirty years later. Sikelelwa attributes a lot of her growth to MOSAIC:

“This organisation has been my college and my university.”

Sikelelwa, or Sokie as she’s known by her colleagues and the people she helps, has the quiet confidence of a self-assured woman on a mission. She speaks as one who remembers how far she’s come and knows where she’s going.

Sokie’s clients all describe her as a God-sent. They speak of her as a woman who has the ability to listen to them with no prejudice and with whole-hearted compassion. One client went so far as to say you can get lost in Sokie’s compassion. In an environment where most people really want to be listened to, being heard not only allows clients to feel heard, but it allows them to feel seen and cared for.

Part of the reason Sokie has the ability to connect to her clients on a personal level is because she can relate to where her clients are coming from. She too was once in an abusive marriage in her early twenties. At the time she didn’t know that what she was facing was abuse:

“I wasn’t aware at the time that I was abused because I wasn’t beaten by my husband. But I knew women that were physically abused in the area.”

When she became a part of the growing movement in her community that would later become MOSAIC, Sokie was able to realise that she needed to get out of her toxic relationship. It took some time before Sokie could be free because both their families were informed by a religious viewpoint and they frowned upon her decision to leave.

But the ever resilient woman, Sokie believed then as she still believes now that where there is a will there is a way. It’s something she regularly shares with her clients. She doesn’t believe any situation is totally hopeless and believes in encouraging her clients to see this.

Sokie is passionate about her work. She admits that this vocation isn’t one that can be motivated by money. You have to want to help people. That is what has driven her over the years, the desire to help other women get out our grow out of difficult situations. It has also been a rewarding experience:

“...I’ve learnt so much from them [the women]. Especially when they come here and they are giving me feedback on what they’ve learnt in our sessions.”

But she hopes that in the future she can do work that also involves helping children from tough situations too.

Through it all, Sikie's faith and her children are her buoy that holds her up. As with any emotionally taxing profession, the different situations that she helps with can take their toll on her. It isn't always easy to leave everything at the office. On the days she ends up taking the load home with her, her children know that engaging her with fun things and gospel music will get her going again:

"I think now they are supporting me in different ways. One will make coffee, the other one will open up the gospel music. And they know it doesn't matter how I feel if there's gospel music I will feel better because I will start singing it out. Then they'll say let's do this and I'll join them. It's like a madhouse."

No matter what the future brings Sikie's way, what is certain is that she has impacted the lives of many, and that impact will carry on beyond the doors of the organisation that has helped her grow.

I can do something about it

Interview and narrative by Emma Backe and Kumbi Chitenderu
Philipi, Cape Town – 13 May 2022

Lerato is a quiet woman by nature, but her soft-spoken voice keeps its momentum as she tells her story. She's a local woman who has lived in her area for quite some time. Like many clients who end up at MOSAIC, she came with her last ounce of courage and a determination and hope to get out from under the abuse she faced.

Sadly, Lerato's husband had managed to keep her under his iron fist of abuse for over a decade. As the sole breadwinner he ensured that she remained a housewife completely dependent on him. Even when she tried to contribute to the household through a security course, Lerato's husband made it difficult for her to complete the course and, thereby, to secure an additional source of income for her family. Their home environment was toxic for the couple's children as well. Their eldest child struggled in school and Lerato's husband did nothing to ease the anxiety—if anything he added to the child's anxiety with disparaging comments about their school work.

Often, Lerato felt that she couldn't do anything about her situation. Several times she tried to have the police intimidate her husband, hoping their presence would reduce the violence. She recalls one such incident when they came over to the house to talk to him. Again, being the sole breadwinner, she was worried that having the husband arrested would negatively impact her family, but maybe the police could make him feel afraid of harming her. But the visit from the police that night only made matters worse. As soon as the officers left, the husband physically assaulted her, claiming that he wasn't afraid of the police, they were his friends. The very duty bearers tasked with protecting her from violence had failed.

Support from Lerato's family also wasn't forthcoming. If anything, they encouraged her to stay in her abusive marriage, telling her to hang in there and hold onto hope that her husband would change. This is sadly a common way of thinking among many African families. The idea of divorce is often treated as unthinkable, and a woman ought to demonstrate her strength and fortitude by staying in the relationship, no matter what 'troubles' she faces within the marriage.

It's not clear what broke the camel's back, but Lerato finally gathered the courage to approach the courts one day to seek a protection order against her husband. Her initial experience with the court clerks, however, was not a pleasant one. They were indifferent to her difficulty filling out the form, paperwork that was challenging for her due to language barriers and education attainment until Nomhle, from the MOSAIC court services patiently helped Lerato out with the procedure. It's Nomhle who also pointed her towards MOSAIC's counselling services in the Philippi area.

After battling through her ordeal alone for so many years, Lerato says she found a welcoming warmth and comfort in MOSAIC that she hadn't experienced anywhere else. During her counseling sessions she was able to open up about things that she had never been able to share with anyone before. She says that now, through the counseling she's received, she's able to share her story even with other members of her community in a way she wasn't able to before.

Lerato has since moved out of her abusive husband's clutches and lives separately with her children. She hopes to get support that will compel him to pay child maintenance because providing for her children alone is still a feat. Although he provides for the children when they ask him for specific things, this still isn't enough.

The biggest thing for Lerato through her time with MOSAIC is that she's been able to gain a new found freedom in her thinking. She now knows that being unemployed, though difficult, isn't something that prevents her from doing something about a difficult situation she may find herself in. For twelve years she endured physical, emotional and financial trauma at the hands of her partner because she had always believed that she was helpless and could do nothing about her situation. But since receiving counseling at MOSAIC, she is able to imagine a different future for herself and her children.

Kutlwano

Interview and narrative by Emma Backe and Kumbi Chitenderu
Philippi, Cape Town - 13 May 2022

Fun, easy going, full of life, these are some of the words and phrases one can use to describe Kutlwano. From the moment she walks in for the interview to the moment she leaves, Kutlwano, exhibits a fighting spirit that won't be dulled by life. Hers is a story about how what should have been a celebration of new beginnings turned into a nightmare, but a nightmare she's been able to fight through and come out of stronger.

On New Year's Eve of 2020, the mother of two rang in the new year, as she always did, with her family, friends and neighbours. Among these neighbours was a young man, let's call him T. T was still in high school at the time but wanted to tag along with the old group. Naturally, the celebrations went on well into the early hours of the next morning, with the group moving from one fun spot to another until they ended up at her neighbours' house (T's house). She had always felt safe in this space, and she felt even more safe because a guy she was having a casual relationship with had also fallen asleep in the same house. Just a bed away in the same room was T who had crashed out next to his pregnant girlfriend just a few hours earlier. The house was still bustling with the sounds of others still having fun.

In the new year morning light, Kutlwano woke up in confusion to someone having sex with her. It took her a few seconds to come to and realise that it was T. The moment she looked at him, T stopped. The sun had come out and the house was quiet, it was now just T and Kutlwano left in the room. *Was this a setup? What's happening?* A myriad of questions raced through Kutlwano's mind. *Where was everyone?* Just then another family member came knocking on the door to summon T. He abruptly got dressed and left a confused and panicked Kutlwano who couldn't figure out if she was imagining things.

In her state of confusion and distress, Kutlwano immediately went home, just next door. Even though her sisters and daughters were in the house, she couldn't tell them what had just happened to her, so she left in search of her cousins and the friends she had been with the previous night, hoping for answers. When she couldn't find them, she sat down outside one of the houses and broke down in tears. This is where her group found her.

That morning was a difficult one to say the least as it eventually became clear that the initial support that Kutlwano had received disappeared, leaving her with no choice but to report the matter to the police on her own.

"But that's when my real problems began," Kutlwano says, recounting the day that she went to press charges. Without giving too much space to the unhelpful behaviour of the sergeant on duty that day, it's enough to say, we at MOSAIC believe that that particular police officer should not be in a position to assist victims of any kind. His unkind words, callous, cold and unprofessional behaviour left Kutlwano feeling more isolated, shamed and even more traumatised. He gave her misleading information around what her statement to him meant and made her feel that the law would not be on her side because she was the victim of a young man who was still in high school*¹. The only helpful thing the

¹ MOSAIC will pursue this matter

sergeant did for Kutlwano was drop her off at the MOSAIC Thuthuzela in Philippi as was his duty.

At MOSAIC she found the solace she had been seeking since her ordeal. MOSAIC tried to help her pursue her case with some initial success. T was briefly arrested for his crime but was soon let out due to 'a lack of evidence'. Unfortunately, Kutlwano's case was bounced around from officer to officer with no result and she eventually resigned her efforts, not believing that anything would be done about it.

Despite the disappointment legally, Kutlwano says coming to MOSAIC helped her then to get over the anger and resentment she held within. Being able to share her story and be heard helped her heal a gaping wound that was exacerbated by the cruel remarks that came from community members who clearly supported T and his family.

She has since become a part of a support group of women that meet and talk on a regular basis. "I've learnt more things about abuse at these workshops and groups," Kutlwano says. "For instance I now know what emotional abusive behaviour looks like and I was able to break up with my previous boyfriend because I recognised that in him," she says with confidence. "I even encouraged him to get help." She says she has gained a confidence that T had stolen from her. "I can stand tall and look them all in the eye, even him. I still see him all the time in our neighbourhood, but I won't hide or shrink away," she says.

As the interview ends, one can't help but feel infuriated on her behalf at the injustice of what she's been through, what she still faces on a daily basis, but there's a sense of hope and encouragement because she's clear on her self worth and will be damned if anyone will make her cower anytime soon.

Kristine

Interview by Emma Backe
Wellington, Cape Town - 20 May 2022

Kristine is a 32 year-old mother of three, two girls and a boy. With the help of her counsellor, Gertrud, she relayed her story and explained how she ended up as a participant in MOSAIC's *Rights and Referrals* workshop.

Kristine and her children live with her mother and stepfather. One day she found herself at the Department of Social services (DSD) seeking assistance for her middle child who wasn't attending school. She doesn't quite elaborate on the reasons why, but be that as it may someone at the DSD referred her to Gertrud and MOSAIC where she ended up participating in the RR workshop, a game changer that helped her in more ways than she anticipated.

Something she repeated consistently throughout the interview is that she came away from that workshop having learned so much about her rights, rights she didn't even think she had. But since attending the workshop she has come away with greater knowledge on where she can go for help about various issues when she needs to.

It took a little time before Kristine finally shared with our interviewer that the education she received at the workshop was crucial in how her relationship with her boyfriend is now progressing. Being a woman of few words it seems, it's again not quite clear when Kristine's boyfriend began to physically abuse her, but since she started participating in the workshops and learning about domestic violence, it seems she has had the courage to be more vocal and assertive in her relationship. She says as a result, her boyfriend doesn't physically abuse her anymore. She's seen a change in his life as well.

Kristine also attends counselling sessions with Gertrud, who encourages her even during the interview to keep coming.

The few counselling sessions she has attended have been helpful in better communication between her and her children and her parents. Being able to open up to an outsider about life in general and her living situation at home has brought about the improvement.

Like many other MOSAIC clients, Kristine says she has found her voice and the courage to speak to other women, including women from her church, about the tools she's picked up at MOSAIC. She's also been able to make personal connections and develop friendships with other women at the workshops, women who can relate to her experiences and be a support system for her.

Annexure:
Notes from Mitchell's Plain Focus Group
1 Nov 30, 2021

Group 1 was facilitated by Leo. It had 8 participants: six men and two women. Participants are involved in various parts of community including the health sector. A lot of the conversation was around what could be improved practically because participants were frustrated with having meetings where they did not seem to get beyond talking and planning.

The focus group was centred around three main questions. The participant discussions will be grouped under these three questions. A disclaimer though is that some of the points brought up by the participants overlapped, particularly between question two and three.

What were your expectations coming into SAFE and what have you taken out of it so far?

Participants seemed to have mixed feelings concerning this question. Some of them felt that their expectations were met to some degree, because through this platform participants were able to learn about other organisations, or at least get introduced to others fighting the same fight. The SAFE platform helped them to grow in their knowledge in the process of assisting GBV victims. The platform assisted participants in knowing where certain resources could be found through which stakeholders.

However, participants had some frustration with the platform too. In as much as they got to know more about the different stakeholders, they didn't always have accurate and up-to-date information on the various stakeholders involved with the platform. This meant that referrals ended up being fruitless at times because participants would refer them to the wrong address because an organisation has moved or because the service that a victim needs is not adequately covered by the organisation they have been referred to.

One participant noted that at times the lack of sharing information came from some form of insecurity caused by financing. Some organisations know that bigger organisations will get more funding and that caused them to withhold information because they would want to compete for the same funding opportunities. Ultimately, it's the victims that suffer.

Participants identified a lack of accountability and follow-up with each other as one of the main reasons why victims often times fell through the cracks.

Finally, participants didn't like that the big stakeholders like the Department of Social Development were not as involved at a ground level as they should be. Such key stakeholders need to be involved at a grassroots level rather than coming to one meeting or coming in when things have already progressed.

What could be improved in the collaboration with SAFE?

Accountability was a recurring theme for participants. SAFE participants need to find a streamline system that can help them keep each other accountable and get victims quick access to the help they need. There needs to be a system that allows to immediate follow ups to make sure that people are assisted.

There needs to be a review of where funding is being placed and whether more funding should be put in under-supported areas of assistance.

Participants were adamant that there needs to be a change in culture and way of thinking, especially around the type of abusive language that has become common place and at times used as simple jokes. Organisations need to think around working against specific targeted issues together so there is no overlap or oversight.

What will help this shift in culture is definitely having active practical engagement with each other as SAFE stakeholders, participants said. This idea is borne out of the frustration that a lot of these meetings were all talk, participants want to see practical steps being taken to implement their ideas.

Transparency much like accountability is something that needs to be strengthened within the SAFE platform. Having transparency will assist in accountability and thus making sure people are assisted as best as possible.

Participants also wanted to see more engagement with the religious community. Engaging leaders in these spheres will help people be more willing to report instances of abuse because they know they have the support of their leaders.

What are some goals you would like SAFE to address moving forward and how do you see the collaborative platform helping to assist and facilitate these goals?

Participants were eager to have set practical goals that need to be met next year Chief among these was setting up a database with each organisation's profile and up-to date information on the organisation and the services they offer. This, participants said, would help because everyone would know who to reach out to when people need assistance. There also needs to be a way to ensure that this database is monitored and constantly updated. There was a suggestion that within this database there be some streamline method of keeping track of the people who have been assisted and those who still need assistance, this will aid in transparency and accountability. In connection with this database, there was a suggestion to create some WhatsApp platform that gives automatic response to victims who need assistance so that they know they will be attended to.

Another suggestion that came up was that there needs to be a strategic meeting on how the SAFE platform can engage political parties to meet the needs of the community regarding GBV issues. There needs to be a way to hold SAPS accountable and strategy to use local spaces like religious spaces and schools as safe places where people can flag instances of abuse. Concerning SAPS, participants suggested that funding be put together

for neighbourhood vehicles that can be used to remove victims from spaces of danger. This should be something that can be done in collaboration with SAPS.

SAFE needs to be specific about what aspects of GBV they want to tackle in the next year so that organisations know where to throw their weight in getting things moving in the desired direction.

There was a suggestion to set-up a Facebook page alongside the WhatsApp platform, and to share the necessary information on these platforms to make sure people are assisted. And key stakeholders need to be “forced” in as it were, at the grassroots level.

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