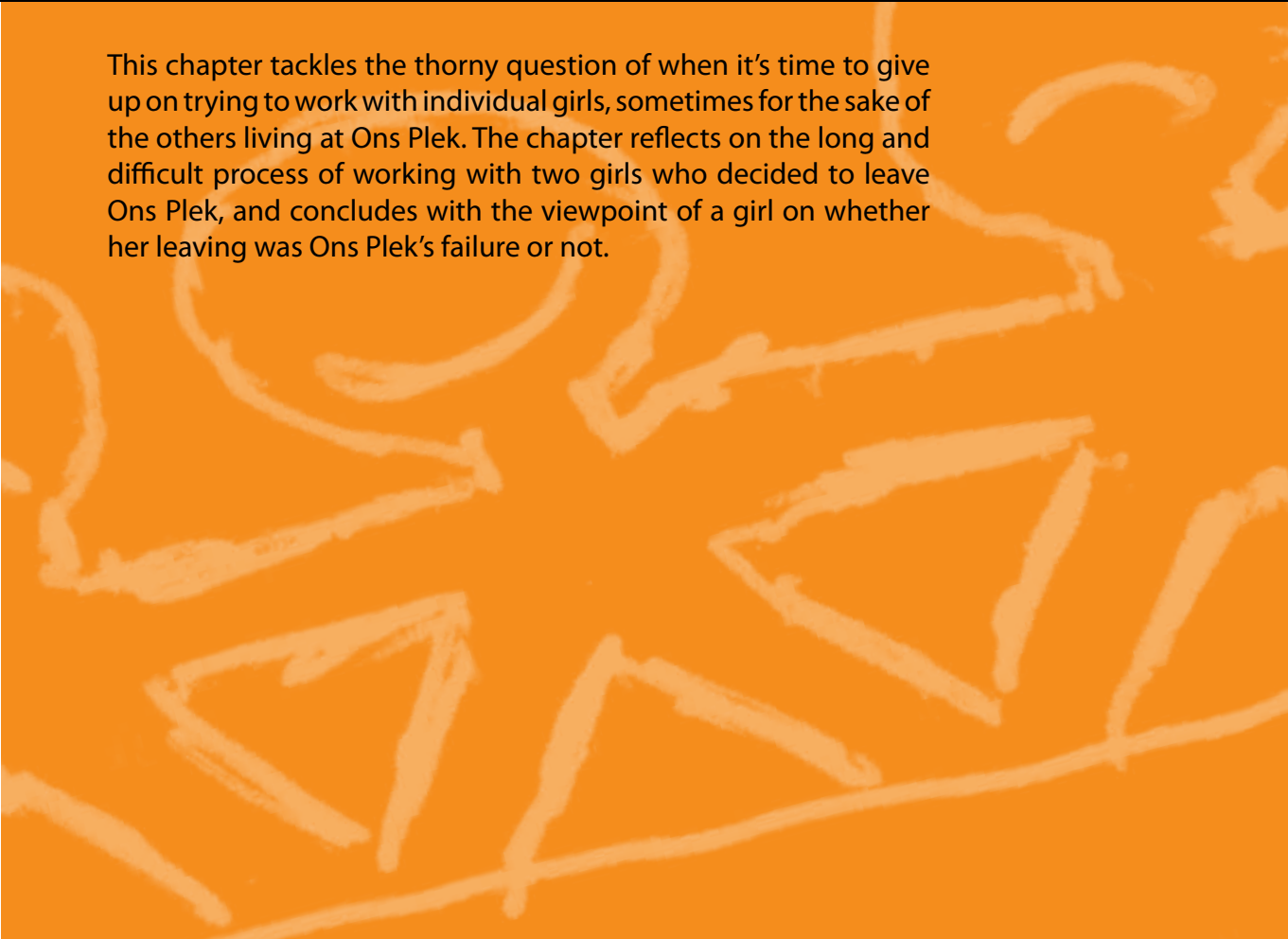


Chapter 9

'Quiet weekends' - and when to quit

Pam Jackson

This chapter tackles the thorny question of when it's time to give up on trying to work with individual girls, sometimes for the sake of the others living at Ons Plek. The chapter reflects on the long and difficult process of working with two girls who decided to leave Ons Plek, and concludes with the viewpoint of a girl on whether her leaving was Ons Plek's failure or not.

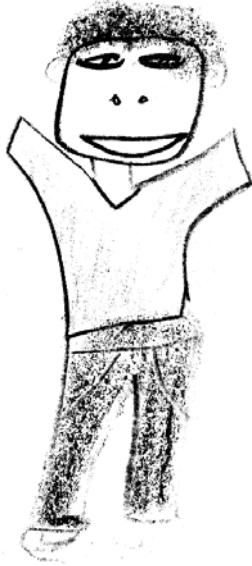


Years ago I walked into Ons Plek on a Monday morning and asked how the weekend had been. Childcare worker Joyce Mateta assured me it had been a quiet weekend. I climbed the steps to the office and started to work. During the day Joyce mentioned that a man had been stabbed to death outside Ons Plek. "I thought you said it was a quiet weekend, Joyce?" I queried. Her response was, "Well, it was quiet by Ons Plek's standards!"

On another Monday, I asked on arriving at Ons Plek if it had been a quiet weekend. This time it was childcare worker Nompucuko Gonyela who answered that it had. Later, the social worker and I sat down for a brief handover case discussion with childcare workers Cynthia Hlati and Nompu to hear the details, if any, of this particular quiet weekend.

The story of Nokuthula

Nompu reported that Nokuthula, who had been given permission to visit her family, had come back to Ons Plek earlier than expected, with many treats for the other girls. This particular child had been at Ons Plek for five months, far longer than any of us had expected her to stay. She had been living on the streets for four months before that, and had on her own initiative begun attending Learn-to-Live school for street children.



The school then asked if she could stay at Ons Plek to enable her to get maximum benefit from her education. The mother had left her upbringing to the grandmother, who was now too old to exert any discipline. Nokuthula had begun stealing and drinking with friends when she was 11 years old. Chased out of the community at the age of 14 by the neighbours, she tried staying with her mother and the mother's boyfriend, but was forced to move to her aunt when the boyfriend tried to rape her. After a few months she then ruined her chances of staying with her aunt by again stealing so often from the neighbours that they, too, chased her out of that community. She moved onto the streets in the city centre to avoid meeting community members.

Enter Ons Plek into the life of a 17-year-old teenager who had already experienced much neglect, an unstable home and rejection, but also love and some discipline. Although she was always well enough fed and clothed, she now stole almost compulsively and thereby invited community rejection. Add to this her drinking and thinners habit, developed on the street, and a very bad temper.

Could Ons Plek make a difference? And how? Part of making a difference lies in socialising or re-socialising a child. Nompu reported that she had directly confronted Nokuthula with her hunch that Nokuthula had come home early this weekend because she had stolen money from someone in the community, and beat a hasty retreat to Ons Plek.

In addition, she reported that Nokuthula had telephoned her grandmother, who took Nokuthula to task about some other bad behaviour at her house, also this weekend. In response, Nompu had overheard Nokuthula threaten to kill her grandmother and all her cousins. This anger sounded more serious to us than Nokuthula's usual outbursts - or was it a way of increasing their fear of her in order to get her own way?

We decided that Nokuthula must first see the social worker, in an attempt to defuse her anger. Nokuthula was an angry person and her large size made you hope she would

never be your enemy. Once her anger was more manageable, we could tackle the issue of stealing. It was not a simple matter of discussing the possible consequences of stealing. In Nokuthula's case her stealing might be something she did in an attempt to fill an empty emotional hole inside herself which would require years of counselling to resolve; considering the consequences would not fill this hole. We considered what logical consequences we could implement to discipline her. We could not lay charges against her ourselves because we were not the victims, but we could take her home to apologise to the neighbours - but if we did this would we be putting ourselves and her in physical danger? The community might turn on us in anger. We decided that childcare worker Nomfundo Pilisani would do a home visit to find out from the grandmother if our suspicions about Nokuthula getting into trouble with the neighbours were correct, before we confronted Nokuthula herself.

In addition, we considered the fact that Nokuthula had had a very unsettled, rootless life. Life story counselling would help to provide her with some sense of continuity about herself.

The story of Ntsiki

Then there is Ntsiki to discuss, said Cynthia, the childcare worker coming on duty. Ntsiki had been sleeping in the back yard of her house for a year before she was brought to Ons Plek by committee member and volunteer Lucia Oosthuysen. Because of her constant habit of coming home at all hours of the night to her foster family, she had been refused access to their house. I was reluctant to admit her, because the prognosis for change in her behaviour was slight. She had already been placed by social workers in another foster family, and had continued with the same behaviour rather than use the opportunity to change. I did not think Ons Plek would offer anything different. I feared that Ntsiki would use Ons Plek to become friends with Cape Town's strollers, and would eventually move onto the streets of the city.

When Ntsiki arrived, at the age of 15, she was constantly at the gate of Ons Plek calling male passersby to chat to her, and it required the constant attention of the childcare workers to keep her occupied with duties or activities with a volunteer when she was not at school. On shopping expeditions she would slip off to sniff thinners and then come back to the house, impossible to control.



After a few weeks at Ons Plek Ntsiki calmed down; she tried thinners less and less often. On weekends home, she was allowed into the house again because her behaviour was noticeably different.

Now Cynthia, the childcare worker, who had been off duty for a few days, enquired whether Ntsiki had returned to Ons Plek. Ntsiki had not returned from school the week before, when Cynthia was on duty. Nompu reported that it had been a bad weekend for Ntsiki. On Friday evening she had arranged for thinners to be passed through the gate to her. Nompu had confiscated it and in terms of our rules, implemented consequences (as explained in Chapter 8).

Girls who are drunk or under the influence of drugs have a counselling session once they are sober again. If they behave in a manner dangerous to other girls, they can be put out of the house until 6 p.m. the next day. If girls are drunk often, they may be asked to attend a treatment programme for alcohol, drugs or thinners, and once they have made

an appointment for this, they will be allowed to come back to Ons Plek. The appointment must be made by them.

In this case Ntsiki had to shower and do extra duties.

On Saturday night and Sunday night she had repeated the performance. Sometimes Ons Plek refers drug-dependent girls for specialised counselling. For Ntsiki, who lacked insight (although 16 years old, she operated as a 10-year-old would), counselling would not help. What worked with her was a consistent and firm approach.

We all agreed that Ntsiki's behaviour had been deteriorating steadily - a phenomenon we often saw in the early days of Ons Plek and which often happens with street children. The children change and mature until they reach a peak, and then instead of maintaining that behaviour the standard drops and does not change again. Now we have learned to manage the phenomenon better. The secret is to change their physical conditions slowly, by not giving a false sense of material wealth, so that they have to work to achieve but not so much that they are overwhelmed. The other important element of the strategy is to be constant in providing consequences, so that they don't deteriorate too much before someone takes action.

At this point childcare worker Joyce Sethole from Siviwe walked into our meeting. She had done all the home visits for Ntsiki, as she lived in the area. She reported that Ntsiki had stopped visiting her stricter sister, and now only visited the other, more lenient sister despite the open invitation from the former. We decided that Ntsiki was not using Ons Plek to her benefit. She was getting to know the city too well, and might be in danger of strolling in the city - the very fear I had had initially. She was now also avoiding the good influence of one sister, and only seeing the other.

The questions we asked ourselves again in our meeting, on this Monday morning after a quiet weekend, were these:

Are there any other consequences to Ntsiki's actions which will help her decide to choose another lifestyle? We debated amongst ourselves and decided not - we had already implemented many consequences and had seen Ntsiki improve, but only in the short term. This child had come to Ons Plek already living a lifestyle which in the long term would be self-destructive. Could we expect her to progress steadily without any relapses? Obviously not, but was this a relapse or was it an ongoing downward trend? If we continued to house Ntsiki, would her behaviour influence other children, whose interests we must always hold in balance with those of the individual?

Ntsiki enjoyed her lifestyle, she enjoyed bullying others and sniffing thinners, and she did not take anything seriously. Counselling would not help her. She did not quite fit in with those needing special care for mentally challenged people, and even if she did, this was not a facility available to many.

The bottom line was that Ntsiki did not really want to change. She was also not addicted. She had shown that she was capable of change but did not appear interested in sustaining any changes she made. In any environment she would gravitate to the naughty kids having fun, and would use drink and drugs if they were offered to her. She could only be helped if she helped herself.

Given that we could not place her anywhere where temptations did not exist, the only thing we could do was confront her with the realities of life.

We decided to meet with her family and her, to gain the cooperation of everyone in her life. Joyce would visit the family to invite them to the meeting and to fill them in on our concerns. At that meeting we would have to explain that Ons Plek's goal was to help children stay off the street. We had helped Ntsiki leave the streets of her community. Yet, if her behaviour continued to go the way it was going, all we would have succeeded with was having given her a space to become confident on the streets of Cape Town. Ons Plek could only allow this behaviour for a certain period of time before it impacted on others, and we could only tolerate it while there was some hope that it would change. Ntsiki must decide if she was going to use the opportunities Ons Plek offered, or make her own way in life.

While we waited for the family to meet, which would take a few days, we implemented an immediate consequence. Ntsiki attended dancing lessons with volunteer Fiona Ross, which were highly coveted by all girls. Ntsiki was one of four Ons Plek girls attending the lessons, with a waiting list of twelve girls. Ntsiki would have to give up dancing lessons until she re-earned the privilege. This could be seen as a punishment, but we explained that to enjoy the privilege of dancing lessons Ntsiki had the responsibility to use them and all other programmes offered by Ons Plek to build up her life. Use of thinners undermined all the programmes, and losing dancing lessons was a concrete experience of what would happen to every aspect of her life if she continued to use thinners.

We waited for Ntsiki's family for three weeks. During this time Ntsiki obtained more dagga and thinners.

She started involving the younger girls when she used them and developed further friendships with street boys through the courtyard fence, despite all our precautions. We felt that things were reaching crisis proportions; Ntsiki's behaviour was now a direct danger to the other girls. Her social circle outside the gate was growing, which increased the chances of her graduating onto the city streets instead of off them (in her case the community streets), and she was no longer responding to disciplinary measures. Neither was she rebellious or unpleasant. She was just herself, a fun-loving person who did not like to delay gratification, a spontaneous soul who would worry later about the consequences of her actions.

We had already tried to implement the consequence of not using the opportunities that society makes available, by taking her out of dancing classes. Now we stepped this up. She was effectively throwing away any opportunity to prepare for life as an adult. If she did not make it at Ons Plek, she would ultimately end up sleeping on the streets of the city or the community that she came from. We sent her home for a week, to whichever sister she chose to go to, to think about her future. In her actual home circumstances, the realities of which had faded a bit from her mind, she could better decide what she wanted to do.

Would she be safe? A lot safer than if she eventually graduated onto Cape Town's streets. Were we doing the right thing? We were not doing what we wanted to do, which was

helping
cleaning
cooking
washing



to protect her. We were trying to take some control and intervene in an almost certain downhill slide onto the streets, because of the proximity of the city to Ons Plek, if she stayed with us. Our choices were between Cape Town streets and the streets of her community, where she was at least known and had family who did offer some protection. We had known, when we took her in, that there was a low prognosis for change. Should we have tried? I do not know the answer. All I know is that we made a difference initially, that for others we have made a vast difference, and that you never really know how the process will turn out until you've tried.

As the meeting ended I turned to Nompu and said, "I thought this was a quiet weekend." "It wasn't a quiet weekend," said Nompu, "but we are used to handling these things so it's all part of our work. It's just that more happened this weekend than usual. And I forgot to say, boys from another gang stabbed a boy outside the gate on Friday night!"

Nokuthula and Ntsiki leave Ons Plek

Some weeks later both Nokuthula and Ntsiki left Ons Plek.

Ntsiki decided to stay with another one of her sisters, who had not taken her before because her husband, now deceased, would not have her. We agreed to this, although we knew that the placement was not ideal - the sister drank with Ntsiki, and the arrangement might not last. We knew that we had nothing more to offer Ntsiki unless she was willing to change.

Nokuthula left because the pressure was on and she was not prepared to change her life. Initially we had not expected Nokuthula to stay long, but after five months, after a little bit of running away and coming back in the beginning, she was settled. She had continued to go to school at Learn-to-Live as before, and had been visiting family members. Neither of these activities had caused extra stress and temporary unsettledness in her, as sometimes happens with other girls. However, she was so comfortable and confident that she had been organising her life to continue with various anti-social behaviours. She bullied the other girls in the house and intimidated the staff in a way that was so subtle it had taken a while for us to realise that she did not receive the same level of discipline as the other girls. Unbeknown to us until we did a surprise cupboard inspection, she was also providing a safe place for her old gangster friends to store their personal supply of drugs, courtesy of Ons Plek.

The next steps for Nokuthula were to deal with her anger, to reduce her bullying to enable her to accept the discipline and guidance she needed to re-socialise, and to maintain important relationships with family and friends.

Nokuthula talked at length in her therapy sessions about some terrible experiences. Our hearts went out to her. But after a while it became evident that she was not using the discussions to work through her anger. She genuinely enjoyed the attention, which was much needed, but she also used the sessions to distract us from her anti-social behaviour. Our attitude was that she needed attention and sympathy, but her past experiences did not excuse her from being accountable for certain behaviours.

We cannot allow bullying of the other children. Ons Plek is supposed to be a safe place for everyone. The needs of the other girls aside, the question in Nokuthula's case was, would we have helped her any more by allowing her to stay, but always with her bullying as a behaviour to deal with? She would only have become a worse monster, until Ons Plek was either ungovernable or she left anyway.

Nokuthula was not hampered in making use of the opportunity Ons Plek offered her by lack of intelligence or lack of confidence and ability. She had had some previous experiences which had led her to where she was at this point, but now, through therapy, she had the opportunity to revisit these and choose different directions. She chose not to make changes, but instead settled down to Ons Plek's routine and got to know it so that she could abuse the system, by turning it to her own advantage.

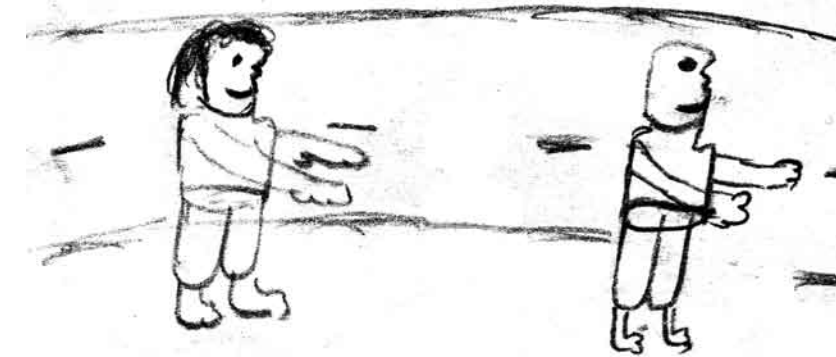
She would have remained settled for a long time, but not really changed her life. She had simply moved her street life to more convenient and comfortable premises. With the pressure on her to stop bullying and stealing, Nokuthula decided to move out to the streets. We no longer served her interests. She still visits sometimes and greets enthusiastically whenever she sees us.

Looking back on hard decisions

I recall Jane Keen, the founder, through her employer the Child Welfare Society Cape Town, of several Cape Town shelters, lamenting the fact that treatment plans often are not followed through. I had just started at Ons Plek at the time, and for the first time came across a certain girl who was drunk. I wanted to give her another chance. Jane was very frustrated because she had had several discussions and given several warnings to this girl about previous drinking bouts, and felt the warnings needed to be followed through now. "New people always start from the beginning again," she said. Meanwhile the client continues to play the same game over and over, moving on to a new social worker when the previous one tumbles to them. In this way people can avoid getting help. Their behaviour patterns may cause them pain, but changing is an effort and although it leads to less pain, the devil we know is often the one we choose. If the child, or even adult, is very challenged mentally and unable to foresee the results of their actions, then we have to protect them from themselves, no matter what. For this we often do not have the resources we need.

What about people like Ntsiki, who falls between two stools, not intelligent enough to really think ahead, but not so mentally challenged that she needs to stay in an institution all her life? Could anyone realistically protect her from her actions? To do this would require a 24-hour nanny following her everywhere to stop her getting into trouble. Would we have allowed her to leave, had she been younger? No, we could never allow a child younger than 16, or maybe 15, to make her own decision to leave. We fetch children back over and over if they run away.

Is it good to give up on people? No, we always wonder if there was more we could have done. But is it good, is it helpful to the person to continue to support them in destructive life habits and patterns? Is it helpful to them to protect them from the consequences of their behaviour forever? We don't think so. There comes a day when we can do no more without the client's effort. A day when every child or adult has to put their shoulder to the wheel, according to their ability. A day when without this, we have to call it quits



Our statistics show that we fail with five per cent of girls almost every year. Twice we have had a bad year, with a failure rate of fifteen per cent. We measure our success by whether the children go back to live in the community permanently or whether they go back to the streets. Our success does not mean that they live harmonious lives with their families from then on. It just means, in some cases, that their family lives have improved to the extent that they can tolerate living at home.



“Ons Plek did not fail me, you gave me a vision”

One of Ons Plek's first girls, who had lived on the streets for three years, spent a year with us and then moved out to the streets for good, was Unathi. Unathi was a born leader and organiser, a strong person who also suffered from depression. Unathi, at the age of 18, was also an alcoholic. For three months she worked in a factory and tried to change her life so that she could get back her child, who had been removed by social workers. I saw her once a week in therapy.

Towards the end of this time she said, “I can't keep it up any more, trying, trying, and trying. I'm not used to the discipline, going to work every day, same time, coming home, preparing for the next day, not taking a drink.” Unathi dropped out, but not before saying, “Ons Plek did not fail, you gave me a vision of a life I didn't know existed. You gave me a choice which I never had before. But I've decided to live the life I know.”

Renée loves to remind us of a folk tale which helps us to understand what makes the girls (and many ordinary citizens) stop walking the hard, high road that requires constant self-discipline.

This old story, as Renée remembers it, runs something like this:

There are those moments when the addictions, fantasies, destructive ways of coping, or restlessness of a particular child are slowly destroying her. We explain to her then that she has to decide to stay and cooperate, or leave us. She first experiences the situation of having no drugs, no running about, no adrenalin rush from danger, and no physical pain such as really having her feet cut off. Yet she does not run away, despite this being quite easy to do; instead she submits to staying at home and being gated, despite offering great protest, often rushing to the gate, wailing and complaining to visitors about 'being in jail', and so on. She learns to wear her 'own shoes' - learning painstakingly to read and write, to cook and clean, to talk nicely to people. Her survival depends on these things, her own shoes. Ons Plek helps her through the painful process of adjustment. Some girls make it, but some girls put the shiny shoes back on their new feet...

There is a girl who is a poor orphan. She works to take care of herself. She painstakingly makes herself a pair of red shoes by hand. They are not very smart or very pretty, but they are good strong shoes. One day a carriage comes past, and a smart lady takes her in and starts to take care of her. The lady takes her to church on Sundays. On the way there she sees a pair of lovely, shiny new red shoes. She can hardly think of anything else. She asks the lady if she can have a pair of those red shoes. Eventually the lady says yes, and takes her to buy the shoes. The man in the shop is old and thin, and there are many beautiful pairs of shoes in the shop. The lady tries to convince her to buy another less ostentatious pair of shoes, but eventually lets her have the pretty red dancing shoes. As soon as she puts them on, she starts dancing. She dances very beautifully, but always faster and faster. Nothing and nobody can stop her. She dances until she is virtually a wraith. Eventually the townspeople decide that there is only one thing to be done to save her life. A hunter catches her, and cuts off her feet. In time her feet grow back, and she wears her old red handmade shoes, all the wiser now.¹



¹ This is a well known fairy tale retold in many ways, most famously by Hans Christian Andersen. This abbreviated Ons Plek version, with its shocking, ending owes much to the version told to Clarissa Pinkola Estes by her Aunt Te-reza, as retold in *Women Who Run With The Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992, London: Rider, pp. 216–219).