

Thanda's quest for dumped babies

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This week, the National Adoption Coalition of South Africa (Nacsa) said while the number of abandoned babies had declined slightly in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, anonymous abandonments are rising.

This, the experts say, means there's little chance of these children, who are dumped in dustbins and rubbish dumps, ever being reunited with their biological families.

Research shows that if the mothers are foreign, they face a lack of support or social services from the Departments of Justice, Home Affairs, Health, Police Services and Social Development. Foreign mothers, too, risk deportation if they put their babies up for adoption.



Abandoned baby caseworker Thandazile Zulu is a social worker at Joburg Child Welfare. She visited an address in Yeoville this week to try to find a mother who had abandoned her newborn in hospital in January. Zulu is seen affectionately holding the baby, here at the Ethembeni Children's Home in Doornfontein. Picture: Nhlanhla Phillips

To mark Child Protection Week, which starts today and ends on June 2, the Saturday Star spoke to Thandazile Zulu, a social worker who's right on the front line of baby abandonment in Joburg.

Johannesburg – Rose Street* has turned into a dead end for Thandazile Zulu. After searching for hours, there's no sign of the mother who abandoned her newborn baby in hospital.

Zulu wonders if she has ever even lived at this nondescript Yeoville address that she scrawled on the official hospital form after she gave birth.

Zulu, the abandoned baby caseworker at Joburg Child Welfare, has the woman's name – Lulu Makope* – but she doesn't know if that is real either.

"No, I don't know anyone with that name living here," Julie Kasongo*, a Congolese preacher, tells the social worker, inside her home in the back portion of the large property. Her Congolese neighbours concur.

"Try the main house," urges Kasongo*. "There's a lot of Zimbabweans living there."

Then, earnestly, she adds: "And if you find that baby, give it to me. That lady who dumped her baby has an evil heart."

Upstairs, in the main house, Zulu hits another wall.

"There's no one like that living here," insist two women, each shaking their heads.

No one here wants to give Zulu the homeowner's contact details either.

Zulu's slight sense of suspicion lingers. "You may find there could be a hidden agenda. The mother could be in the house right now."

"I never met her and I can't identify her. I've done my part. Now, I'll have to wait for the police report."

For Zulu, these interviews are the most important part of her job: the "detective" work to try to trace mothers who have abandoned their babies – or their relatives – here in some of Joburg's toughest, grittiest neighbourhoods.

This is her second case on this street. "We had an abandoned baby found in that house," she says, pointing to a dilapidated property, "and another was found there, in that church nearby."

After she leaves Yeoville, she goes to find hope: the Ethembeni Children's Home, or place of hope, in nearby Doornfontein. This is a refuge for the city's babies discovered in dustbins, on rubbish dumps, at taxi ranks – or deserted after delivery in state hospitals.

Eleven of Zulu's babies are being lovingly cared for here – including Makope's* thriving four-month-old son, who smiles at Zulu as she hugs him close. When she puts him back down in his crib, he whimpers.

"I have a bond with all of these children," she smiles, gently. "I visit each of the babies because I need to monitor their placement. By the time they leave, the bond is there because I visited them regularly."



Thandazile Zulu searches for hours to find a mother who had abandoned her child. The 25-year-old has learnt fast to navigate the region's strained social welfare system. Picture: Nhlanhla Phillips

Before she fled, Makope* had reportedly told hospital staff she wanted to put her baby up for adoption.

For Zulu, the “first prize” is finding these children’s families. If she, or the police can’t, they’re prepared for adoption.

“The most important thing about my post is that I conduct thorough investigations before making these babies available for adoption,” explains Zulu. “I visit the places where the child has been abandoned and interview people around there.”

It’s not easy.

“The moment you say you’re a social worker, people often want nothing to do with you.

“Most of the people living in these areas don’t have legal documents. They don’t trust anyone and think that maybe we’ll report them.”

Zulu works “hand-in-hand” with the Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences unit, to trace biological family or relatives.

“The investigation should take 90 days, but sometimes it’s longer. We place adverts in a national paper to aid in the search for the mother, or relatives.

“It may happen that the child is abandoned here but the family in KwaZulu-Natal or in the Eastern Cape, don’t know their daughter was pregnant and that she abandoned the baby.

“Through the newspaper, sometimes they come forward and say they want the child, that ‘it’s our child’. It’s rare but it does happen.”

Barely two years into this, her first job, the 25-year-old has learnt fast to navigate the region’s strained social welfare system.

“Sometimes, I put pressure on myself because I want to do justice for these children. I work very hard. I’m inexperienced but my bosses like the way I do things,” she smiles, confidently.

Given the often horrific nature of child abandonment, it’s easy to deride birth mothers.

But experts have long described how poverty, mass urbanisation, rape, incest, cultural beliefs, restrictive legislation, diminished family support and stressed institutional and foster care systems drive child abandonment in South Africa.

Zulu has a staggering 48 cases on her case load – and now a colleague has just given her three more. She takes it in her stride, she says.

“We’re doing this job for these babies. I just feel we need to do justice for them. Their families might have abandoned them but we must be there for them

“Unsafe abandonment happens all over. I have one child who was found here at Bree taxi rank in a public toilet, another child who was found in a dustbin in Kensington inside a plastic bag.

“They’re found in hotel rooms in the inner city and in school bags at Park Station.

“Sometimes, the baby is left alone in a flat when the mother disappears. A neighbour will hear the child crying and take care of the baby for one or two days, until she realises the mother is not coming back. Then, she goes to the police station.”

For Zulu, hers was a haunting baptism of fire in 2015.

“My first case was a baby found in a burnt plastic bag in Soweto, on a rubbish dump. After I visited her, I couldn’t sleep, because of her injuries. She was only four days old. We never traced the family, but she recovered fully and was adopted.”

At Joburg Child Welfare, she is regularly debriefed and supported by her supervisor.

“As social workers, part of our training is how to deal with these cases,” says Lowina Fourie, the child and family unit manager. “But it shows the humanity of our social workers is intact. I don’t want them hard and unemotional. In the moment, I know they’ll deal professionally with the case before them.”

Zulu tells how sex workers often have little choice but to abandon their babies. “They’re sex workers, drug addicts They come to us because they want their babies back. We refer them to Sanca for drug treatment and Famsa for parenting programmes and if they comply, their baby can be placed back into their care.”

As Zulu drives, she glances at a dark, festering building in Hillbrow. “It can be scary. Sometimes, I get scared to go inside these places, especially in Berea and Hillbrow. I have to call a police escort because I don’t want to go in by myself.”

There are other anxieties. Zulu tells how the Department of Home Affairs now requires an interview with her and each of the babies in her care, to obtain vital documents like birth certificates.

“Before, I’d write my report and the department would send the certificate. Now they want me to physically go in to their offices with each baby. The queues are so long. It causes more problems with court. It’s frustrating. We feel stuck, and all we want to do is help these children.”

There’s a sense that the strain of the job – the fluctuating stress, heavy emotional toll and long hours – has made Zulu somewhat battle-weary. She shares her dream of working with juvenile offenders in the future, and becoming a motivational speaker.

But her heart remains with social work. Zulu, now the breadwinner for her five siblings, grew up in a child-headed household in KwaZulu-Natal after both parents died.

“I was being taken care of by social workers and I saw how they helped us. That’s why I became a social worker.”

Her sister, who raised her when she was 18, recently graduated as a social worker, too.

“She sent me to school, because she had to look after our other siblings. Then I supported her financially and now, she has graduated. We know the value of social work.”

* Real names could not be used.

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