In the short time since we launched the Friday Youth Activist series, we have had the privilege of shining a spotlight on young people from across the continent, who are doing, rather than talking. Tired of waiting on their governments, local leaders and elders, we are seeing a rise of young activists who are carving out their own paths towards equal value and the advancement of all citizens. With a nod to past cultural and traditional value sets, their eyes are firmly trained on a different future. A future unrestrained by patriarchy, sexism, corruption and inequality.

Patriarchy and inequality is something that Andre Ocean has been challenging his whole life. As a Transgender activist in Zimbabwe, Andre’s passion for challenging the system and attempting to correct the wrongs he saw, started at an early age. “When I was at primary school, I joined the Girls Child Network because it was a platform to raise awareness on issues that young girls were facing.” The activist flame was lit.

“I have always looked at things differently. I guess it’s because I knew from an early age that I was different.” With three siblings, Andre was the proverbial third child, often causing mischief. This led to his parents believing that he was ‘acting out’ and being mischievous, when at just 6 years old, he decided that he was done with his ‘play-play’ hair and asked the local barber to give him a close shave to emulate his childhood hero, Peter Ndlovu, the captain of the then Zimbabwean national football team. “Looking back, I guess it was a cry for help, because although I knew I was different, I had no idea what this different was. Back then, I didn’t know anything about Trans or Intersex. I just knew I was different.” The onset of puberty and changes to his pubescent body led to Andre battling with dysphoria and struggling to cope. “It was hard because my body was betraying me and I had no control over the changes.” Still confused with his identity and with limited access to information, he went online for answers. “I came across GALZ, a local organisation working with the LGTBQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) community in Zimbabwe. It was such a relief because I finally had the answer to why I was different and did not fit into the ‘traditional’ categories.”

Having lived openly for a couple of years, 2018 was a turning point. “I decided that I wanted to own my gender identity and transition, but that meant that I needed to speak to my family. I came out as a Transman to my brother who surprised me by saying that he had always known that I was different, but was not sure which category in the LGTBQI spectrum I identified with.” But transitioning means both extensive physical and psychological changes and this requires specialised support. Organisations such as TIRZ (Trans and Intersex Rising in Zimbabwe), offers a safe space where young people in the trans and intersex communities can access health information and services, including mental health and counseling services. “I came across TIRZ when I was investigating how to transition fully and what that entailed. Today I work for them as a volunteer to help other young people like myself who are transitioning.”

To address the needs of the Trans community in Zimbabwe, organisations such as TIRZ have developed innovative outreach programmes. One such programme is the ‘Boxes in Binaries’ sessions, that seeks to help young people who are struggling with gender expression and sexual identity. “As human beings it’s really important for that we have an identity. What we do is help unpack what this identity is. Say for example a person could be assigned a female sex at birth and they feel attracted to women, but at the same time feel more like a man,
they’ll often feel unsure of what they should call themselves. Because society, says if you are a woman and dating another woman, then you are a lesbian. So, this can cause confusion if you are not aware that you could be Trans.”

Creating a sense of belonging is fundamental to building a vibrant community. Taking a leaf from long established Christian women’s meetings, that take place each Thursday in communities across Zimbabwe, TIRZ has set up its own weekly Thursday meetings for Transwomen, called ‘China Chemadzimai’. Another long-held tradition for African men has been to sit around the fire and discuss the issues of the day. “Through ‘Choto Chevarume’, we can come together as Transmen in a safe space to connect and discuss issues that are impacting not just us, but society as a whole.” These include issues such as SRHR and HIV, sexual gender-based violence, mental health and substance abuse etc. “No issues are taboo. We talk openly about everything. But, importantly as men, we need to look at how to unlearn bad behaviours and instill behaviour that is more respectful, tolerant and honourable.”

Transitioning is a journey and for others it can take a lifetime. “Some days I am totally focused and engaged on my advocacy work and then there are days where I just want to jump into someone else’s life that seems much brighter or fabulous than mine, and then I remember that I have too much work that needs my attention.” For Andre, this means rooting out injustice, making it better and creating harmony where he sees discord. “I want to see changes that allow a person to have the freedom to express their identity and sexuality in a healthy way. Another issue for me, is the abolishment of the ridiculous abortion law conditions that takes away the rights of people to have the freedom of choice over their bodies.” The Age of Consent and the right of a young person or adolescent to access sexual reproductive services, is another burning issue on Andre’s long list of the injustices that he wants to right.

This bold and passionate young man is a force to be reckoned with. When asked what message he would like to share with other young Trans young people, he does not hesitate, “You are the wind, you are unstoppable.”

Follow Andre on:
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Follow TIRZ Organisation on:
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