We caught up with Abigail Kandepu, winner of the Zambia Adolescent Activism Awards, whilst she was travelling to the Iwampuma district in rural Zambia as part of a campaign by the Department of Health to engage the community about gender based violence (GBV). “I was invited to join them for a two-week outreach to use my SRHR and GBV expertise with adolescents and young people to engage them on the key drivers of GBV and what they should do if they were a victim of defilement.” Her dedication to helping young girls avoid the scourge of GBV or being pushed into early child marriage is well-known and has led her to being recognised as a leading voice in Chibuluma Township, where she comes, as well as the larger Kalulushi area. Abigail is known as a person who “walks the talk” and she takes pride in this attribute. “I guess if I’m gonna connect with young people and show them that there is another path to follow, then I need to be someone that they can relate to and hopefully they will be inspired to change and choose to live responsibly.”

When asked why she decided that she would take the path of an activist, Abigail says that she saw so many young girls being forced into early child marriage, or having unwanted pregnancies and dropping out of school, or where they were being defiled by family or community members, it compelled her to stand up and start advocating for them. “I saw that there were a number of NGOs in our community and thought that if I joined forces with them, I could use my voice and their resources to help change some of the injustices that I saw on a daily basis.” Looking back now however, she concedes that when she first started, she did not know what she was doing, but has built up solid experience in advocacy campaigning and community engagement. “I have put my studies towards becoming a registered nurse to good use, as it has helped me to understand the health aspects of my work as an activist and why treatment and medication are so important to changing the prospects of young people in my country.” She shares an instance where her psychology counselling training she received as part of her studies helped her to determine that a young girl was not being truthful about an unintended pregnancy. After using learnt tactics to gain the girl’s trust, she determined that the stepfather of the young 15-year-old girl was in fact defiling her which resulted the unwanted pregnancy. Abigail reported the matter to local social welfare and when they went to investigate, the man was caught in the act of defilement and arrested. “So many girls are too scared to come out and state that they are being abused. They are worried what their families will do or say in retaliation. Also, many of them are just not certain about what to do in terms of reporting. That is why we are out here for the next two weeks, to let them know about the toll-free number that has been set up and that we have safe spaces where they can come to, to get help and advice.”

Like so many young activists on the continent, Abigail started her activism journey early but in just five years she has fully immersed herself in advocating and promoting good healthy lives for all youths and adolescents in her community and beyond. Today she works with a number of NGOs and health organisations in her quest to advance the health and rights of adolescents. She is a volunteer peer educator and community activist at KWATU (Zambia Centre for Community Programmes) and is also a SASA-trained (Zambia PEPFAR programme) GBV councillor and community champion where she reinvests her time to train fellow peers on the impact of GBV both in schools and the broader community. She is a member for YOPPCEE health-education team,
which she joined in 2016. The group promotes good health for all youths in Kalulushi. Giving back and sharing her knowledge means that Abigail also works as a family planning counsellor with SARAI, a local NGO that helps to promote family planning in both the community and in schools by utilising youth friendly corners. Her love for working with young girls and boys means that she is also active in the local school community where she works as HIV/SRHR champion in schools and communities, which forms part of a broader programme supported by DATF (Lusaka District AIDS Taskforce) and Ministry of Health. She also works with Lions of Kalulushi, where she helps to distribute condoms as part of a larger HIV/SRHR education and district outreach.

On her work as a performer and dancer, as part of the CHEP (Copperbelt Health Education Project) sensitisation outreach programme, we ask if she has any ambitions for a career in acting? She laughs, “Oh no, I’m not very good. It’s more about getting the messages across for me, but we certainly have some great acting and directing talent in the programme.” It seems that health and all aspects related to the health of young people remains her passion and focus. It is therefore not hard to see why this small dynamo was recognised and awarded as the overall SAT Zambia AAA winner. The impact of her work was evident in the video that was played on the night that she took home the top prize. You see, Abigail has been at the forefront of working with local NGOs to promote boys’ and girls’ clubs in schools and in the community where adolescents and youths have a safe and friendly space where they can openly talk about matters affecting them, without judgement and recrimination. This youth-led approach has resulted in an increase in the number of clubs in the schools and in adolescents engaging in productive activities and staying safe in schools. Something that was even recognised in the Zambian Ministry of Education’s Q1, 2019 report. As a result of the sexual reproductive health education in schools taking place in the District, it recorded some of the lowest numbers in adolescent school drop-out rates and a reduction in teenage pregnancies compared to previous years. According to the Victim support report, 2019 Q2, GBV cases have also seen a meaningful reduction. Through her work as a GBV activist and sensitising efforts in the community, Abigail’s contribution to education and a lowering of the GBV incidence rates was also recognised. But access to SRHR and family planning services remains the pulse of her advocacy work. “I love being in the thick of things, where I get to change people’s lives and futures. Where we teach them about their rights and what it means to take responsibility for their sexual health.” Abigail has also participated in large outreach campaigns where she and her colleagues have helped to distribute over 20 000 male condoms, 2 000 female condoms, over 1 000 brochures on sexual reproductive health education, as well as addressing over 2 000 school going children to advocate for SRHR and encouraging them to visit youth-friendly corners and youth clubs, to learn more. “My aim is simple, I want to use my voice and platform to ensure that young people in my country can access health education. This means that they will start making informed choices about their futures, which I hope will lead to a productive and fulfilled life. It’s where I find my peace.”

With so much on her plate, one would wonder what else she could possibly do. “So, with my winning funds from the Adolescent Activism Awards, I actually decided that I wanted to give back something tangible to young girls in my community. So I purchased some cloth to make reusable sanitary pads for the young
girls in my community. Additionally I worked with some colleagues and friends and we compiled and printed a brochure in both English and Bemba on various issues such as GBV, HIV and HIV prevalence, early child marriage and the importance of understanding your rights to SRHR and access to services. And we will be distributing these into the communities that we are going into over the coming months.” On what she plans to do with the award money she won as the winner, she says “No brainer, I’m putting it towards completing my nursing studies. I want to be a registered nurse so that I can work with both NGOs and government to ensure that young people in Zambia have access to the health care services they deserve.” If Abigail’s energy and focus is a precursor for what’s to come, our continent’s future surely looks bright.

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