

Manx Linksa series in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to local people, who have lived or worked in the developing world, about remarkable people they have met!

As the “summer” months move on, most of us try to take some time out to escape from our reality, to have a much earned break, The holiday that we’ve saved for, worked for and longed for. Maybe a journey to foreign climes in anticipation of different cultures, different cuisine and a different climate!

This month my own holiday break has meant that I am using a slightly different format for this article! Instead of introducing someone else’s super hero from the developing world, I would like to introduce you to that person you haven’t even met... that person who could be your hero, if you just take the time to hear their story. You will see them in any major city of the world, at street corners, walking the traffic, doing the rounds of cafés and bars.

I first met Tina last year, a small black African, working her way from tourist to tourist, table to table, taverna to taverna. Laden with a back- pack filled with CD’s she smiled and chatted to people who shook their heads in dismissal, said “no thank you” very loudly, put up a hand as if to repel her, looked away, or completely ignored her as if for them, she did not exist. An unscripted part in their play. An uninvited guest at their holiday destination.

For Tina, and hundreds of thousands like her, her sojourn on a Greek Island, though a much anticipated dream, is no escape from reality. For every sale from each illegal CD she touts through her weary day, she personally gets only 2 Euro in commission. She is rebuffed by tourists, hounded by the police, threatened with imprisonment or deportation and vulnerable to abuse. She is constantly on the move on a circuit of cheap accommodation. I watch her and wonder what drives her to this life style. “I am not begging,” she says, “I have my freedom, I am using this to survive, I do this instead of being a prostitute.”

Tina’s story is typical of so many others: a brave spirit that will not be defeated against all odds. Having purchased a CD I did not want, we shared a coffee and I was privileged to make a new friend and slowly piece together a story of another super hero that has faced a reality I can’t begin to imagine.

Tina is an immigrant from Nigeria, a country that is the 7th largest oil producer in the world, but the oil wealth has only helped the few elite. Increasing population and unemployment, combined with local and national corruption has created widespread poverty that has resulted in gang violence becoming a daily reality. Her twin brother was robbed at knife point. Her Father died when she was 2. Her mother had to leave her three children to earn enough money to send them to school. Tina went to commercial college and managed to find a good job working as a nanny with a Lebanese family in Kono, Nigeria. But the gang violence caught up with them, her boss was shot in a local robbery

and Tina stayed with her employer's family when they moved back to Lebanon, so that she could continue to send money to her husband to care for their 2 children.

Living in Beirut through the bombings of the civil war was not a life style choice but a frightening necessity based upon the need for a job and a sense of loyalty to the young Lebanese widow. It was only when she discovered that her wages were not being paid into her bank account that her loyalty to the family finally crumbled. She returned to Nigeria to discover that her relationship with her husband had broken down, her children were living with her mother and she was now their only provider.

In a belief that Europe had a better approach to human rights than the Arab world, she then travelled to Greece in search of her dream job and security... and for the last four years has been touting illegal CD's on the streets. With a daily allowance of 2 Euros for food, she has to find 140E a month to cover the costs of her accommodation, and still send money home to support her mother and children. With the increase of people downloading music from the internet her job as become ever harder.

Her dream? Is not to take time out for a holiday in the sun, but just to get a European Visa so that she can once again get a regular job as a nanny to enable her children to come to live with her and have the opportunity of a life style she has never yet experienced.

In the mean time, I watch her as she moves on, a brave smile on her face as she approaches yet another table of tourists who sit back sipping their Café Frappe without a care in the world but unwilling to look her reality in the face during their "much earned break".

Tina wanted me to write this, so that if this summer, in some other land, you should see a street hawker who has had the courage to flee their country in search of a different reality, you may think of her story, and not dismiss them with disdain. For me she represents the hundreds of thousands of people of this world who have the courage and have taken the initiative to follow a dream that against all their efforts seems to be just beyond their grasp. Necessity has driven them to walk the streets of our cities seeking a better life for themselves and their children. Their radios may be cheap or broken, you may not need their wrist watch, or their bangles or beads, but trading with them can offer them the dignity they need to start a new life, a life like ours. You could be the means of changing their dream into reality.

The One World Centre is a registered charity on the IoM that seeks to raise awareness of global poverty, inequality and injustice and to encourage a response; If you would like any information about the work of the One World Centre, or would like to support their work, or to join as volunteer or member please contact Cheryl on: cheryl@owciom.org