



Get involved and make a difference

# Looking after burn survivors



Bongani Phakati aged 8 flies to Cape Town for keloid surgery in September; Laura Bouillot (19) is a volunteer from France; Nelson Tshabalala aged 7 is from the Free State and has just received hand surgery performed by Prof John Fleming at Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital.

### Thuli Malinga

Some 15 000 children are badly burned in South Africa each year.

Children of Fire looks after children who are victims of veld fires, electrocution, chemical burns, burning shacks, paraffin stove explosions, intentional burning in war zones, and severe hot liquid burns.

Based in Auckland Park, the charity has a handful of staff but many long-term volunteers.

The organisation helps burns survivors from as young as two months to about 27 years old. It gives advice to older burns survivors throughout Africa and has been helping children with complicated burns for 15 years. More than 300 children have received surgery and many more helped with rehabilitation. The charity also teaches people at risk about burns and fire prevention, and helps with disaster relief in greater Johannesburg.

### Surviving the fire

If a person has survived a fire, injuries from burns are so devastating that even doctors back away in shock.

Working from the tip of the toe to the top of the head of burn victims, doctors painstakingly find a way to make everything work again. They look at how to make fingers bend, eyelids close; repair holes in skulls, acquire prosthetics when a body cannot be rebuilt surgically. And once they've done their best, if an appearance cannot improve they try to help victims find the courage to face the world.

Children are equipped to achieve their maximum, despite the negative reaction from the public.

Tristan Jones, a paramedic who has helped the charity since a child, said, "We run incredibly economically, with huge amounts of goodwill from medical professors and students, occupational therapists and teachers. It is that combined passion and compassion that allows us to help."

Children of Fire also works with inventors to ensure that practical solutions reach squatter camps. While the most common burns are from hot liquids, the most severe are from a house burning or when a child is attacked. One in three serious burns cases in South Africa is intentional.

Mitta Lebaka, who survived massive chest and neck burns from an electric stove, is now a researcher for the charity. Lebaka said, "We have children who were set alight by their own mothers. We have a boy who was tortured by others aged 10 and 11, who tried to burn him alive."

It is emotionally draining to care for these children but everyone who visits Children of Fire finds a bunch of happy children having fun. The little ones have piano lessons and often visit the theatre. No matter how badly hurt, they are schooled, and the teenagers have annual adven-



Burns survivor Andani Mphapuli, (his stepfather received a 107 year jail sentence for setting him alight), and Michael Wessels, Africa Outreach manager, Children of Fire.

tures to the Drakensberg. Some have bigger challenges, such as climbing Mt Kilimanjaro. In 2011 more teenagers hope to summit Mt. Cameroon.

The idea is that no mountain, real or in the mind, should be too high to climb. By convincing children that they can do anything, they end up surprising the world.

Many have matriculated, two are studying law, one has a career in the arts. As Children of Fire organisation comes of age, so do the first burns survivors it started helping.

### How can you help

The charity is a registered non-profit organisation which receives no funding from government and has no major long-term sponsors.

Money is the most useful way to assist as the recession has hit donations hard.

You can also take a sabbatical and become a volunteer for three months to a year, and make a permanent difference in these children's lives. Visit [www.firechildren.org](http://www.firechildren.org) for more information, follow the charity on Twitter, TheBurningIssue or phone 011-726-6529.

Donations can be made to Children of Fire, account number 614 920 23919 First National Bank, Melville.

### Our vision for the future is

- All homes have access to safe electricity
- Dangerous cooking, heating or lighting equipment is banned
- Young children are not left alone
- Young children need not die from burns, or be denied medical treatment
- Social attitudes turn from revulsion at disfigurement to acceptance of individuals with a different appearance as equal members of society.

## Hooked on helping



Marietta Neumann, a 23-year-old Melville resident who first came to the country in August 2005 for a gap year to volunteer at the burns charity, Children of Fire. Dedicated to helping others, Neumann has carried out detailed research on burns injuries. Also the designer of the Children of Fire T-shirt, Neuman is currently studying medicine at the University of Witwatersrand, plays guitar and sings in the local band, Bongeziwe and the Fridge.

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**Times**