



LEFT: Volunteers day at the TygerBear Social Work Unit at Tygerberg Hospital. Children and families who've been exposed to traumatic incidents can turn to the unit for support.

# LESSONS FROM MY ORDEAL

These children have been through severe trauma but they're helping other to heal

**S**HE has been called many names since she was raped by a classmate – but “victim” is one word that can't be used to describe this teenager.

“I'm a winner,” says 14-year-old Lizelle\* of Cape Town. “I decided to speak out and use what happened to me to help

other kids.”

She has pink flowers stuck behind her ear. “I passed them earlier and heard them calling, ‘Pick us. It's spring,’” she says, touching the silver cross on the chain around her neck.

We meet her at the TygerBear Social Work Unit for traumatised children and families at Tygerberg Hospital, Cape Town. The

unit is a refuge for children affected by abuse, divorce, loss of a parent and other traumas.

Today Lizelle is a host at the volunteers day of the unit, which is the only facility its kind to provide a comprehensive service to traumatised children and their families.

“Recently I addressed the

whole school about the work the unit does. Apart from a few stupid children most congratulated me and said, ‘You've become so mature,’” Lizelle says.

She's dressed in the latest fashion and wears a bright pink scarf around her neck.

Around us, between scores of teddy bears for sale, are photographs of children with their eyes blacked out to protect their identities. Some have been shockingly abused.

“Initially it was difficult looking at the pictures and hearing their stories but what happened to me and these children's courage was a wake-up call!”

One Monday afternoon late in 2007 Lizelle was overpowered and raped in the toilet at a leading Cape Town primary school. The perpetrator was a boy the same age who was once her boyfriend. A complaint was laid but the case was dropped because of lack of evidence.

“Trusting boys is still difficult but I don't want to give up,” says Lizelle. “By being involved I'm learning to believe in myself again and one day I'll again believe in the goodness of people.”

One of the flowers behind her ear falls to the ground. She scoops it up deftly. “I want to help other survivors like me and prevent them becoming lost. At first I also felt as if the nightmare would never end.

“But now I know it will keep on only as long as you allow it to come between you and your dreams.

“People are still talking about ‘the girl who got up to things in the toilets’ but I've stopped listening to the rumours.”

The support and insights of Lizelle and many other young

**(Turn to page 157)**