

Mimsy, Mauritius

Mimsy, 16, lives in Cité Anoska, Mauritius with the family of her 32-year-old sister Vanessa. Her mom died when Mimsy was 6 years old. Her step-father is an alcoholic. Mimsy has two brothers, who are 24- (Steeve) and 19-years-old. Her siblings went to school, but not for very long. Her brother Steeve is a construction worker. He is married, has a 1-year old child, and is expecting a baby. Mimsy's other brother has been in trouble with the law and is now in prison for alleged robbery.



Mimsy (second from right), 15, and Marie Josee Baudot (pink), Children's World Congress on Child Labor, Florence, Italy, May 10-13, 2004

Mimsy enjoys playing with her nephews, but otherwise, for fun, she likes athletics. She has won many prizes as a sprinter.

Mimsy has completed 6 years of primary school and 2 years of secondary school. However, when she decided three years ago to start working to help her sister's family at age 13, Mimsy stopped attending school. "I must help the family of my sister, who is not working and has 4 children," she said. Mimsy's pay makes a difference because only Vanessa's husband works outside the home in their family. He is a gardener and his pay is not adequate for his families needs.

Mimsy's first job was as a gardener. She worked from 6:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m. (6 and a half hours a day), 6 days a week in the sun, planting vegetables in a garden, digging and putting manure in the fields. She had only Sundays free to rest and help her sister at home. In fact, Mimsy developed chest complications and got sick. She was kept in the hospital for a week by the doctor, who advised her to stop working.

Later Mimsy got a job in a factory making decorative flowers for cakes 11.5 hours a day (from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.), 5 days a week for less than \$5 a day. Everyday, Mimsy got up at 5:00 a.m. and drank only tea for breakfast. To learn how to do her job, Mimsy received 5 days of training. She worked with about 50 other 15- and 16-year-old girls, who did the same work as the adults - except that the adults were expected to make more flowers. Mimsy and her workmates were expected to make 800 flowers each a day. For producing 800 flowers, the girls earned 125 rupees (US\$4.34) a day. Since Mimsy was able to make only 600 flowers a day, she was paid only 84 rupees (US\$2.93) a day. Sometimes she had to work overtime until 7:00 p.m. to produce 800 flowers. Instead of saving or spending her money on herself, Mimsy bought food for her sister, Vanessa.

At work, Mimsy had three breaks: two 15-minute breaks for tea, provided by the factory at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., and a 30-minute break for lunch at noon, when she "ate a piece of bread". The girls were allowed to go outside to the shops only during lunch.

However, since the lunch break was only half an hour, they had to eat while they walked. There was no time to relax, because, "If you did not make at least 600 flowers a day, wages would be deducted from your salary." Mimsy ate dinner at home around 8:00 p.m. and went to bed around 9.30 p.m.

Regarding this work, Mimsy said, "Working was very hard and sometimes if the flowers were 'not good', the supervisor would destroy them. She crushed them and the money was taken from my salary." Mimsy did not like either one of her bosses. "The first one was very harsh," she said, "He always said, 'Hurry up, hurry up,' and I had no time to talk to my friends or rest a little."

Eventually, Mimsy stopped wanting to work for her family. "Work is not meant for children," she said, "The only place children should be working is at school."

In September 2004, Mimsy ran away from her sister's home. Initially, she took refuge at her godfather's house. When she left his house, he contacted Marie Josee Baudot, President of the Mauritius Chapter of African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN). Ms. Baudot is also the Chairperson for Publication and Communication at the *Mauritius Council of Social Services* (MACOSS). ANPPCAN contacted the Family Support Unit of the government's Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare, which discovered that Mimsy was at a shelter for girls in distress called Albion.

Ms. Baudot suggested that Mimsy come and stay at a shelter for girls called Foyer Duponsel, where she would be taken care of. However, Mimsy's sister and legal guardian had gone to Albion with the police in the meantime and taken Mimsy back home with consent from the Child Development Unit.

In December 2004, some American girls whom Mimsy had met in Florence, Italy, during the Children's World Congress on Child Labor contacted ANPPCAN after receiving letters from Mimsy explaining the difficulties she was facing working every day at a breeding station. Since returning to her sister's house, she had been cutting grass for the livestock, feeding the cows, and cleaning the cow-sheds by removing the manure and carrying it to the fields.

Subsequently, ANPPCAN contacted the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Women's Affairs to inform them of Mimsy's situation. They discovered that the Child Development Unit had not followed-up with Mimsy since she had returned to her sister's home from the shelter.

Therefore, two representatives from ANPPCAN met Mimsy and her brother Steeve, who could also act as her legal guardian. Steeve consented to allow Mimsy to be taken to the Foyer Duponsel for help. Thus, Mimsy began living at this half-way home where all her needs were taken care of.

On January 17, 2005, Mimsy's dream of going back to school was realized. She started attending pre-vocational training at an institution known as Theresa Ball, which is run by Nuns from the Loreto Congregation. She was studying various academic subjects - including math, English, French, computer science, ethics, cooking, sewing, and arts and crafts - and receiving psychological counseling from a professional psychologist.

Although Mimsy was attending school and having her basic needs met, she still worried about her family and their situation. Her pregnant sister-in-law had assumed Mimsy's difficult job of cutting grass for the livestock, feeding them, and scrubbing the stables. Mimsy hoped that with an education, she would be able to continue helping her family, even though it would not happen as soon as she would like. With support Mimsy hoped to complete her studies and get a job that would allow her to be both independent and support her family.

Unfortunately, on February 4, 2005, Mimsy left the Foyer Duponsel for good. There had been many problems. Mimsy's friends were calling her back to her former way of life. One day one of her friends, who was a drug addict, and another friend tried to force their way in the Foyer and were warned severely by the police. Subsequently, the Foyer started receiving night visitors. At first Mimsy denied knowing the boys. However, when she saw the police patrols every night, she told Ms. Baudot the truth. Yet, then she lied to the police. Nearly every day she went to school, Mimsy continued to meet the boys, who may have tried to convince her to leave the Foyer.

Mimsy also lied to her brother Steeve, accusing one of the wardens of being rude to her. Steeve felt that Mimsy would give the Foyer problems. He was willing to pay for her continuing education, but confessed that he would be unable to look after her all day.

Steeve himself had started working at the age of 7, picking tea leaves. He earned money for Mimsy and their brother when their mother was ill. He now works hard for his growing immediate family.

In February 2005, Mimsy refused help from the Foyer Duponsel. She had originally decided to come to the Foyer home, hoping to have more freedom. However, when she saw that things were not as easy as she thought, she gave up. This experience caused the staff and residents of the Foyer to lose faith and hope. Mimsy's story illustrates how complex and difficult it is for some children to rise above their circumstances, and how hard some people try to help them.

By September 2005, things had deteriorated for Mimsy. Her brother Steeve had invited her to accompany his family to Rodrigues, an island nearby. However, Mimsy's sister Vanessa and her husband refused to let her go. Steeve could have insisted that she come. However, Vanessa, the oldest sister, has taken care of Mimsy since their mother's death and there is no relationship between the brothers and sisters. Steeve also has many problems himself and may not want to take responsibility for Mimsy. Mimsy attempted to commit suicide, but was saved fortunately.

Marie Josee Baudot wrote a letter to the Ministry for Children's Rights requesting that an officer of the Child Development Unit investigate the circumstances of the attempted suicide and issue a report. However, she never received an answer. If a problem had been documented, then the Mauritius Council of Social Services could have intervened (removed Mimsy from Vanessa's house) for the well-being and the future of Mimsy. Now, they cannot do anything, including visit her. Ms. Baudot met with Mimsy's brother-in-law, who communicated that he would never let Mimsy leave his home. He said that Mimsy was fine and had resumed working in the vegetables garden. Now that Mimsy is 16 it is legal for her to work.

Meanwhile, there were new elections in Mauritius and the government changed. Ms. Baudot plans to have an appointment with the new Minister, not only for Mimsy, but for other cases too. The Mauritius Council of Social Services will not give up. In early 2006, they will start a new program for the young people of Mimsy's locality. Let's keep up the fight.