



HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Home is sometimes where we journalists find the stories that touch us the most. This is the truth for me, at least, says **Paula Slier**

I MET GAVIN Maseka on the streets. He was huddled underneath a mound of newspapers and cardboard boxes. Statistics South Africa was conducting a census and throughout that icy Johannesburg night, teams of volunteers were counting the city's homeless.

I poked my microphone at a young man curled up into a ball, trying in vain to keep the 2am chill at bay. "What do you think of the census?" I asked.

In a polite, deep voice, he answered: "It's a good thing, because counting us makes us feel like human beings."

In those days, I was working for the SABC and the night after my interview with Gavin aired on the evening news, I got a phone call. His family, who hadn't seen him in seven years, had watched the broadcast and were desperate to contact him.

And so I went looking for Gavin. But he wasn't sleeping in the same place I'd met him and I had to search for a few

among the garbage, in Algiers – where children roam the streets at night begging for food and in Afghanistan, where people deliberately maim themselves to have a better chance of receiving handouts.

Gavin gave a human face to all those statistics.

I asked him if he wanted to go home and he said yes, but that he couldn't afford the fare. Census South Africa agreed to pay for an air ticket and when I eventually found Gavin to tell him, he immediately stood up and started packing all his newspapers and blankets into a huge garbage bag.

He shook the hands of the other homeless men who had slept alongside him, excitedly exclaiming: "I'm going home, I'm going home!" And then he walked across to a newspaper vendor and gave him his garbage bag with explicit instructions to: "Give my stuff only to the guys who really need it."

Gavin spent that night at the Salvation Army building. It was the first time he'd slept in a bed in years and, when I came to fetch him the following day, he'd had a shower and they'd given him a small school suitcase and some clothes.

Later that night I saw the footage of Gavin's sisters and tiny, frail mother sobbing as they embraced him at Cape Town airport. "I feel the way I did when I gave birth to him," his mother managed to say.

Months passed and Gavin kept in touch. But one Friday afternoon his sister phoned to tell me that he'd passed away. He'd contracted tuberculosis while living on the streets. When I began to cry, she soothed me by saying: "Don't feel bad. He died with his family around him. It's exactly what he wanted."

Home is indeed where one's heart is. 🌈

CITIES CAN BE **UNFORGIVING TO A NATION'S POOR.** I HAVE FILMED STORIES WHERE PEOPLE HAVE MAIMED THEMSELVES TO HAVE A BETTER CHANCE OF RECEIVING HANDOUTS.

more nights before eventually finding him.

"Gavin," I said, almost apologetically. "Your family wants to talk to you."

Tears welled up in his eyes as he explained that he'd been too ashamed to phone home – for his sisters and mother to know he was living on the streets. He'd travelled from Cape Town to Johannesburg in search of work, but a hit-and-run had left him hardly able to walk, let alone work. Phoning home cost a lot of money.

Gavin took my cellphone, gratefully whispering: "Mom..." as the tears ran down his cheeks.

Cities can be unforgiving to a nation's poor. I have filmed stories in Cairo – where 60 000 Egyptians live

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo'burg-born Paula Slier has had her fair share of hair-raising adventures. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track.

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