

MATRIC – I MADE IT!

Saved from the streets – teen's triumph against the odds

HER brother didn't have the opportunity to further his studies after school but Lericia Bailey (19) has big plans now she's the "first to become famous". Amid last year's disappointing matric results hers was a success story.

Tragedy haunted her childhood: her parents are dead, she was once homeless and she has balanced school work with taking care of younger siblings Sherwin (16) and Chesree-Lee (11). They now live in a prefab house in gang-infested Manenberg on the Cape Flats and survive on 21-year-old brother Lorenzo's salary. He works at a call centre.

Despite Lericia's dire circumstances her matric pass is excellent and earned her a bursary.

She was a bundle of nerves the morning the results were announced. "I knew I would pass but wanted to see how well I would pass. I was ecstatic when they called my name," she says.

She will soon embark on a four-year course in business management at Tertiary School in Business Administration (TSi-BA) in Cape Town which offered her a R40 000 bursary. Her best marks were 79 per cent for life orientation and 76 per cent for Afrikaans.

Her story also caught the eye of the Red Door initiative which helps people start businesses. In February she'll present a talk on her experiences.

"I think especially women in my community need to see other women take the initiative and start their own businesses," she replies when asked about her decision to study business management. She knows it will be a



tough course. "The first year is crucial because that's when most children drop out," she says.

Things are looking up for the bubbly teenager – until recently she wondered whether life would ever get better.

She was six when her dad died in prison and soon afterwards the family had to live on the street. They owned only a few items of clothing which they pushed around in a trolley.

"Those were terrible times but my mom never made us feel it was our fault or the situation was too much to handle. She used to say things will get better and I'd always reply, 'Yes, but when?'"

The family eventually found

accommodation in a prefab house on church grounds in Manenberg when Pastor Andrew May took pity on them. "I remember it was a day before my mom's birthday when we met him. We hadn't had a bath in a long time and were very hungry. They offered us soup and the pastor allowed us to sleep in the church that night," Lericia recalls.

When their mother was diagnosed with lupus in 2003 Lorenzo had plans to study business management. Two years ago she died and he had to find a job to support them.

"I thought God won't let my mommy die. I was like: how could something like this happen to the same people all the time? I started thinking God just wants to hurt me.

"Then I realised God had plans for me. I had to be strong for Chesree and Sherwin."

One of the turning points was starting school at Christel House in Ottery, founded by US philanthropist Christel DeHaan.

During her matric exams Lericia stayed with a teacher, Carmen Neethling, as part of a programme for learners living in deprived circumstances.

"Her mother enriched her life tremendously and I listen to her in awe," Carmen says. "She passed down all these wonderful quotes to Lericia."

And what are Lericia's future plans? "If I don't start my own business I'd like to work for a well-known corporate company... in a managerial position."

Lericia has a message for the matrics of 2010: "No matter where you come from your situation doesn't have to dictate who you become. The norm is to drop out because it makes you cool but you'll struggle to get a job. So keep focused, set goals, have ambition. And if your parents don't support you, motivate yourself!" □



MAIN PICTURE: Lericia Bailey at home – a bright future awaits. ABOVE RIGHT: She hopes to inspire her siblings, Chesree-Lee (left) and Sherwin. LEFT: With teacher Carmen Neethling.