

Zaina's Story

Have you ever been rejected by your family, sacked from your job, or denied education because of an illness? This is the daily reality for people affected by leprosy. Every two minutes another person finds out they have leprosy. Someone just like you. A mother, husband, brother, daughter. Every two minutes another person goes through the trauma of discovering they have this disease, and the fear of what it might do to them.

I want to share Zaina's story with you. She caught leprosy just after the civil war ended in Mozambique. Having already faced the terror of conflict, Zaina now had leprosy to contend with. She noticed strange patches on her skin. They were discoloured and had no feeling, but at first Zaina didn't know what they were. When people in her village saw her patches, they knew it was leprosy. She couldn't leave her home without being ridiculed. But the abuse didn't stop there. The villagers declared that she could no longer live amongst them. They forced her out of the community, saying "go to the bush." Then they took her child away.



Leprosy had stolen her young boy. Zaina would no longer be the first face he saw every morning. She wouldn't be there to kiss him goodnight. She couldn't help wondering who would hold his hand when he was scared? Would anyone be there to comfort him if he fell and cut his knee? Would he be safe? Zaina's biggest fear as a mother became a reality. Heartbroken and alone, Zaina was left to fend for herself in the forest.

It's hard to imagine what she must have felt. As the dark nights drew in, she had no place to shelter. Her body became weaker day by day; Zaina didn't know if it was from the lack of food or leprosy. What would this disease do to her? Each night was terrifying and each day was consumed by thoughts of her son. She was scared she would die alone and never see him again.

But her story did not end there. A man saw her and felt compassion for her. He built her a hut for shelter. Then he took her to receive the treatment that cured her leprosy. Local health workers taught her community not to fear this disease and that Zaina's treatment meant she could return to the village.

There, her protector provided a house for her and her son to live in together. After four long years they were reunited. Because of the compassion shown to her by one man, Zaina's life has been restored. She now has five children and 13 grandchildren and enjoys living back in her village saying, "Now I have friends in my community."

Life has turned full circle and now Zaina goes door-to-door looking for people with leprosy. When she finds someone with the disease, she guides them to healthcare services. She tells them, "They will examine you and give you a diagnosis. Then they will give you the medicine you need and will cure your leprosy. You don't have to be afraid."

Zaina's life has been transformed but there are still so many like her in desperate need of help. People affected by leprosy around the world face the same extreme discrimination that she did. Zaina only survived because of the kindness of a stranger – one person who was determined to reach out and make a difference. Will you be that person for someone like Zaina today?