

THE STORIES: REUBEN



First name: **REUBEN**

Last name: **HAMBAKACHERE**

Age: **38**

Country of origin: **ZIMBABWE**

Living in **Ireland** since: **2006**

SHORT SUMMARY

Reuben was a business man living in Zimbabwe in 2005 when he was forced to leave for political reasons. He was married with a young family and his wife and children moved from South Africa to Ireland in 2005 ahead of Reuben to seek asylum. Reuben followed her to Ireland in 2006.

Reuben is a founding member of 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers Platform Ireland (RASPI) in (2010). This group created a data base connecting all 34 Direct Provision Centers in Ireland. It was initially supported by the Refugees Council of Ireland. In 2014 Reuben was invited by Irish government minister Frances Fitzgerald to represent Asylum seekers as part of a working group. Reuben also works as a consultant for 'Cultur' an organisation that uses a community work approach to its work with Asylum Seekers and Migrants addressing the root causes of inequality and injustice. Reuben is a great ambassador for Asylum seekers in Ireland – a great role model for us all.

“... AT ONE POINT I WAS ACTUALLY THREATENED BY SECURITY AUTHORITIES.”

REUBENS STORY CONFLICT AND ESCAPE

Reuben ran his own business in Zimbabwe. He lost a lot of his stock in a raid by the authorities in 2004. At this time matters worsened in a business context due to new laws that made it impossible for business men like Reuben to access foreign currency and carry on his business. In Zimbabwe around 2004 Reuben was targeted by the authorities as he was part of a community representing small business's and was politically active protesting about restrictive practices in a business context. These protests attracted a lot of attention on him from the police authorities. He was part of a political movement that challenged the existing ruling party of President Mugabe. Because of his political activism against the ruling party Reuben was threatened by the police authorities and was advised by friends and colleagues to leave Zimbabwe. Many people who opposed the regime disappeared around this time. For safety reasons Reuben moved to South Africa in 2005 - the first step on his way to Asylum in Ireland in 2006.

I met the Irish Minister to discuss the issues.

STRUGGLING IN THE NEW SOCIETY TO END 'DIRECT PROVISION'

Reuben joined the Refugee Council of Ireland (RCI) as a volunteer in 2010. He started a campaign called 'end direct provision in Ireland'. While the Refugee Council of Ireland supported Reuben's campaign they were not supportive of some of his actions. This development stalled the RASPI initiative as he was

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restrained by a lack of funding and RCI protocols. Reubens somewhat radical approach to end direct provision and proposed actions were not in line with RCI's and RCI was nervous about how their own funding could be affected. Reuben continued to work with the RCI for the next 3 to 4 years.

In 2014 Reuben received his Irish citizenship status and was invited by the Irish government to join a working group to address or improve 'Direct Provision' for asylum seekers in Ireland. Irish government minister Frances Fitzgerald's initiative sought to improve 'direct provision' for asylum seekers in Ireland. However, this was not what Reuben wanted. His struggle was to end Direct Provision in Ireland and he was a lone voice at the government table except for one other person Sue Conlon from the Refugees Council of Ireland that sought a radical change in how asylum seekers are treated. Both Reuben and Sue could not envisage any scenario to improve the situation as conditions and restrictive practices in respect of financial supports, barriers to education and general integration in society and the workforce were firmly in place. Reuben was looking for an alternative to direct provision and realised very soon that this was not going to happen. Reuben states that while there was a meeting of people in the working group "government decisions were already made" nothing could be achieved by remaining or propping up this group. He joined in August 2014 and resigned from the group in February 2015. He resigned for two reasons, 1) there was no chance of access to education and 2) no access to the workforce. He continued his struggle by going public with his resignation with an open letter to Minister Fitzgerald and the Chairman of the working group. Reuben returned to the core RASPI group (12 key members representing direct provision centres across Ireland) he was representing on the

I started a campaign to end Direct Provision. It is racist.

government working group to inform them of his decision. His decision to resign from the working group met with a mixed reaction where some members of the core group thought it better to remain at the table to have more influence on direct provision matters. Reuben argued that the working group was just a "cosmetic" exercise and "nothing tangible was going to come out of it"... this caused a major split in the original core group of activists Reuben was representing. Reuben was replaced by another member of the core RASPI group on the government panel.

BELONGING AND GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Reuben began working for 'Cultur' as a volunteer in 2014 but after his resignation from the government working group he became more active in 2015. Reuben negotiated a contract to work part-time for Cultur. In his contract he has stipulated that he is free to operate as an activist to end direct provision as long as it does not conflict with Cultur's mission and objectives. He is a free agent and feels this is his best chance to give something back to society, that he has as a democratic right to freedom of speech which he will use to change or look for an alternative to direct provision. Significantly Reuben points out that he is representing Reuben (the individual) and the views of some core activists in his response to questions during this interview and is not representing Cultur. The interview recording ended and we continued a general discussion about his family, his dreams and hopes for the future. Reuben is a true activist and great role model for all asylum seekers looking to integrate in their new found societies.