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**Kasfia, a girl with a dream**

I had already been working in Zimbabwe for six months, as a doctor of tropical medicine in a small field hospital, when I discovered that there were a lot of local people who could not travel to our hospital. So I decided to make periodic visits to the surrounding villages. This time we went to a tiny village thirty kilometres away. It was clear then why people could not make the trip to the hospital.

Someone drew my attention to a new-born baby. I went to the hut and checked the child. Everything was going well with mother and baby; it is amazing how strong people are here. The young mother was already cooking again. I was more worried about the little girl in one of the corners of the hut whom I estimated to be no older than five years. Her mother told me that Kasfia was seven. I asked why she was not attending the small village school. It wasn’t much, but the teacher was cut from the right cloth. The mother replied saying it wasn’t necessary for Kasfia to have lessons, because she was blind. I examined the shy little girl and found that nothing could be done about her blindness. She had been born blind.

On the way back to our hospital I couldn’t stop thinking about Kasfia. I could not accept that, if you were born blind here, you were not worth anything, and didn’t need to learn anything. I know that the life of a blind person in the Netherlands is not easy either. My sister Iris is blind. In my mind, I went back to the time when Iris was a child. My parents did all they could to encourage Iris to be as independent as possible. She went to a special school where she learned braille. With lots of patience my parents practised reading with her. I honestly admit that I was often jealous of the extra attention she received. Now, I’m ashamed of that, but my jealousy? My parents understood this. They decided to involve me in Iris’s care. I was especially intrigued by reading with your hands. By practising a lot with Iris, I got it into my fingers too. Never as good as Iris, but I can manage quite well. I can read A

Little Book at infant level. And that’s how the idea was born.

One year on, and I’m visiting the village every Saturday to teach Kasfia and the teacher braille. The devoted teacher was immediately enthusiastic about the idea. I had materials sent to them to work with. In the first weeks, dealing with Kasfia was difficult. She had no idea what was required from her. Until then, she had never been challenged and now two strange people came, who expected all kinds of things of her. Then there was a turning point, thanks to the teacher who made sure that Kasfia could come to school every day and was included in the group. Because he motivated Kasfia to practice the first results became visible very soon and Kasfia became more and more eager to learn. At a certain moment it was clear that I didn’t need to come to visit her on Saturdays at all. The teacher could manage on his own, but I went, because Kasfia was really keen to show me what else she had learned that was new. The fact that Kasfia went to school and learned how to read, was the beginning of a total change. She became increasingly self-aware and was able to stand up for herself. I enjoyed seeing her like that.

After several years, I decided to leave Zimbabwe. I really wanted to start a family and had to say goodbye to this country and its beautiful people. Just before my departure, Iris visited me. She wanted to meet Kasfia, of course. Kasfia was nervous. This was her first confrontation with another blind person but I did not understand why this made her nervous. Later she told me that she thought Iris might perhaps notice that her braille wasn’t as good as I thought. She was aware of this. Of course, Kasfia hadn’t been reading toddler books for ages. Iris, however was really impressed and a close friendship was born between two kindred souls.

That friendship still exists. Kasfia is now sixteen and I’m still in touch with her. The ‘click’ between Kasfia and Iris is much more special and quite profound. Iris has taken over my distant mentor role. Kasfia has a dream. She wants to become a braille teacher for all the blind and visually-impaired people in Zimbabwe. Iris now has the goal of helping Kasfia to realise her dream. And me? I’m just proud of these two fantastic women. What determination!