

Homeless talk

A small newspaper produced in inner-city Johannesburg is helping convert street people into journalists. Stuart Wright reports.

GEORGE KOMPOTI was jobless and desperate when he decided to leave his wife and three children in their Harare high density suburb (read ghetto) last year and seek his fortune as a faceless thief on Johannesburg's inner-city streets.

Before he left he went to a sangoma who gave him a gruesome charm to protect him in his illegal exploits. "I kept it in the money pocket of my Wranglers. It was a thumb, it had no bone. It had been cut open and stuffed with muti to make it full just like a finger," he says grasping his right thumb and cocking his head to reveal dark eyes usually hidden behind the brim of his floppy red beach hat.

"It was for my defence in the bush. We call this the bush," he says waving at the glass and concrete towering over the city streets he calls home. "Here we get no animals, the animal is money. I am chasing money."

Kompoti hunted for cash at knife-point until about three months ago when he walked into a church service to "relax", was converted, handed

the charm to the Brazilian minister and vowed to find a new way of life.

He still sleeps in doorways, parks, abandoned buildings, and shelters for the homeless, but he has a steady flow of honest money and a new charm: a chewed down ballpoint pen he uses to write articles for a small newspaper called *Homeless Talk*.

The paper is run largely by homeless people. More than 200 started like Kompoti by buying copies for 50 cents and reselling them on the streets for R1,50. Like Kompoti, many then move on to contributing articles about their experiences as homeless drifters for which they receive up to R50.

From a dark corner of the Central Methodist Church building Kompoti now mans one of the newspaper's two distribution points and earns about R185 a week.

Judy Bassingthwaighe, a founding editor who met countless homeless people through a

soup kitchen she runs, says: "Some of them have made selling their profession and earn up to R2 000 a month. It raises their self esteem, they send money home, they don't have to beg and some can pay for basic accommodation."

Homeless Talk's mix of profiles, autobiographies, poetry and news sells 40 000 copies of the six editions produced annually, and has won the respect of big corporations. Some take out full page advertisements and Liberty Life has offered free office space.

Until recently the newspaper was run from an office loftily perched on the 44th floor of the Carlton Centre but the editorial board has its roots in the dirty streets far below. Sellers, writers, founding editors and the Central Johannesburg Partnership — a community, business and city council initiative to revitalise the inner city — are all represented.

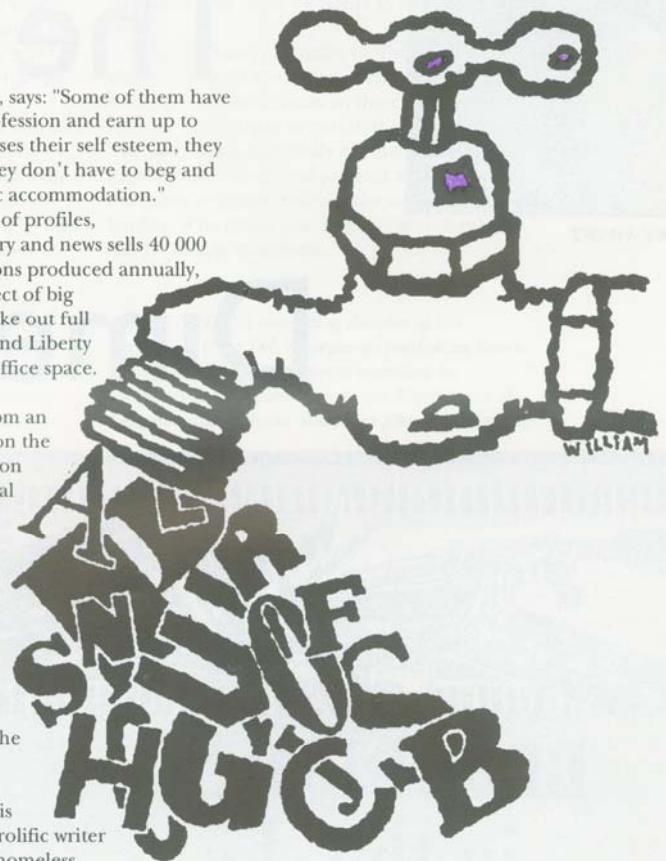
Armstrong Baduza is *Homeless Talk's* most prolific writer and represents other homeless journalists on the board. For a man who could read and write but "had never written a paragraph", he has come a long way since he lost his last steady job at the Johannesburg General Hospital in 1979.

Unemployed and homeless, he joined a gang of youths who sought shelter under the M2 highway at night.

"There was nothing I could do because I was staying with these youngsters. They would break into shops at night and steal clothes, maybe portable radios, and I would sell them." He was offered a way out when he attended a church service in order to get some soup and bread and was invited to write for a newspaper aimed at people just like him.

"My articles were always about my history with a little mixture of scriptures but the stories are mine, about my own experiences on the street," he says peering through grubby glasses at two tatty A4 sheets scribbled full of information for his latest piece.

At 52, Baduza is now developing his journalism skills through weekly workshops run by the Independent Media Development Trust which he says will teach him how to interview,



write about other people, take photographs and type.

"It is good because people are expressing their feelings and people who have no say in the professional media can express themselves in *Homeless Talk* like I did," he says.

Since *Homeless Talk* was launched last April it has grown from a little-known newspaper for the city's forgotten to a little newspaper with a growing reputation that now shares copy with similar publications in Germany and the United Kingdom.

The newspaper's success is closely linked to the lot of those who produce it. For Baduza it has offered an alternative to a life of crime and the promise of a job as *Homeless Talk's* first full-time writer. "I see some improvement in my life," he says baring his yellow teeth in a triumphant smile.

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Stuart Wright is a journalist with the East Cape News Agency.

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