

Issue 23

# STREET LIFE

“TELL PEOPLE ABOUT ME,  
TELL THEM MY STORY”

*Mathew, Kenya*

*The ethics behind the powerful stories  
you help us tell*

## Stories in this issue:

- Abi's story: A voice for those unheard in Bolivia
- Mathew's story: What he asked us to share



# WELCOME

At Toybox, we know how important it is for you to hear directly from the children you support. Many of the young people we work with choose to share parts of their lives so that others can better understand their realities. Even after more than ten years at Toybox, I never take that trust for granted.

I feel privileged to help amplify their voices and a deep sense of responsibility to ensure that our communications honour, never exploit, the experiences they share. It takes a lot of courage for children to open up and, by sharing their stories, they place their trust in us to represent them truthfully and sensitively. This is something we never take lightly.

Hearing children's reflections and hopes, often in the face of real adversity, is incredibly humbling. Their stories are a powerful reminder of every child's potential

– irrespective of their background. As best practices evolve, so does our approach to storytelling. At the heart of it remains the fundamental belief that we must always put the safety and dignity of every child first.

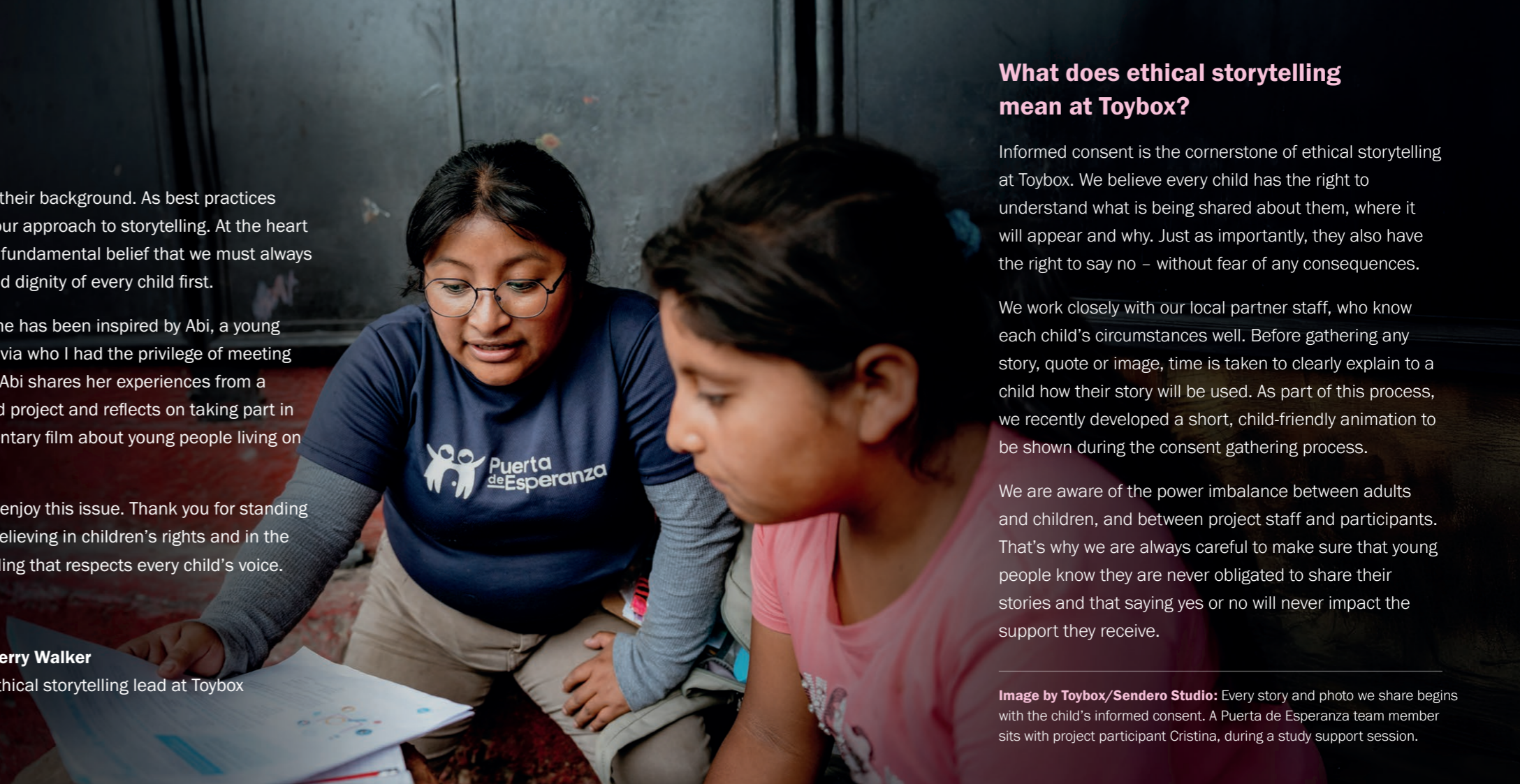
This issue's theme has been inspired by Abi, a young woman from Bolivia who I had the privilege of meeting last year. Inside, Abi shares her experiences from a Toybox-supported project and reflects on taking part in a recent documentary film about young people living on the streets.

I really hope you enjoy this issue. Thank you for standing with us and for believing in children's rights and in the power of storytelling that respects every child's voice.



**Gerry Walker**

Ethical storytelling lead at Toybox



## What does ethical storytelling mean at Toybox?

Informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical storytelling at Toybox. We believe every child has the right to understand what is being shared about them, where it will appear and why. Just as importantly, they also have the right to say no – without fear of any consequences.

We work closely with our local partner staff, who know each child's circumstances well. Before gathering any story, quote or image, time is taken to clearly explain to a child how their story will be used. As part of this process, we recently developed a short, child-friendly animation to be shown during the consent gathering process.

We are aware of the power imbalance between adults and children, and between project staff and participants. That's why we are always careful to make sure that young people know they are never obligated to share their stories and that saying yes or no will never impact the support they receive.

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**Image by Toybox/Sendero Studio:** Every story and photo we share begins with the child's informed consent. A Puerta de Esperanza team member sits with project participant Cristina, during a study support session.

# ABI'S STORY

*“There are so many harsh and painful realities for thousands of children who survive on the streets, who lose hope and fight to change their lives. I hope people will open their hearts and that together we can create a more compassionate world for young people who suffer daily.”*

## Life on the streets

Growing up in Bolivia, Abi, now 18 years old, lived with her mother, who worked selling sweets on the streets of La Paz and El Alto. Despite her mother's efforts, they couldn't afford rent and were eventually forced to live on the streets.

*“The cold was the worst thing – it makes you feel like all your insides are frozen. You cover yourself with newspaper and blankets – but your bones still ache from the chill. I was always so afraid of the dangers of sleeping there.”*

In 2018, Abi met Alalay, Toybox's local partner, after her younger brother was denied hospital care because the family lacked official documentation. The team stepped in, helping them obtain birth certificates. With support, they moved off the streets and began renting a room.

## Finding a voice

Karina from the Alalay team remembers meeting Abi.

“I met Abi about six years ago, when she started attending the workshops for young leaders. She was a quiet girl who didn't talk much. When she was invited to be part of the Girls' Football Team and travel to Doha, I saw a very interesting change. Abi became a defender of children's rights. She got more involved in workshops and even served as class president at her school. In January 2023, Abi attended the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. On that occasion, Abi was a voice for thousands of boys and girls whose rights are denied and who live on the streets or in violent environments.”

## Diaries from La Paz

Abi recently took part in **Diaries from La Paz**, a documentary created with Alalay and Danish NGO International Børnesolidaritet. The film shares the personal stories and self-filmed footage of young people growing up in street situations.

“I wanted my story and my participation in the documentary to show the experiences and difficulties that people face when living on the streets. These are real-life accounts of boys and girls who go through very difficult times, surrounded by violence as a daily occurrence.”

*“I felt inspired because I realised I'd been through many difficult things. At first, I didn't see my strength as an act of resilience. But hearing and watching my story again gave me much more strength to keep going.”*

## Abi's message for Toybox supporters

*“I want them to know that I felt very fortunate to be a spokesperson for children who can't speak about their difficulties. The children supported by Alalay all have hope for their lives, and they are very strong and brave.”*

“The advice I would give other young people who are thinking about sharing their stories would be to not be afraid as it's an act of resilience and courage. Their stories can inspire many others, creating hope and empathy.”

*“The Alalay team made me feel that I wasn't alone and helped me trust in myself. Going to the project always felt like a breath of fresh air. I felt valued, respected and protected. Learning about children's rights had a big influence on my life and gave me greater self-confidence to express myself. As a leader of the 'Yo También Cuento' network and an Ambassador for Toybox, I took part in events representing my country. That's something I'm very proud of.”*

# MATHEW'S STORY

by Lynne Morris OBE, CEO of Toybox



Mathew wore a pink Croc on his right foot, a ripped T-shirt, and blue shorts. We sat on a tiny wooden bench as he told me about his life. He was shocked to learn there are homeless people in the UK. It was hard to hear how he often goes hungry, doesn't attend school, and shares a mattress with four siblings. He recently lost his dad in a tragic accident, leaving his mum to raise five children alone.

Despite everything, Mathew's humour shone through. He laughed about football games with friends. When I showed him photos of my children, he asked about their lives and favourite teams. "Liverpool," I said. He then promptly listed every player. In just a couple of hours, Mathew let me into his world – his struggles, dreams, and gentle spirit. I was loath to leave him that sunny day in Nairobi, knowing I'd been granted a huge blessing.

As we left, he said, "Tell people about me, tell them my story." Mathew is funny, incisive, and determined to ease his mother's burden. He joined the Toybox-supported project in Nairobi nine months ago. I've tried to do him justice, but I know I haven't captured his full energy, hope or sadness. I wish you could have sat beside me on that dusty bench. Perhaps then the weight of telling his story wouldn't feel so heavy.

In our sector, we call it ethical storytelling. At Toybox, we work hard to get this right – telling the truth without sensationalising or diminishing a child's story. That's why I'm excited to share that for the next year, we're handing over the Toybox magazine to children and young people themselves. I can't wait to see what they choose to share. What a privilege to be allowed into their lives.



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