

Maria Nhambu

Dancing turned her pain into joy, hope and a new career

Maria Nhambu's improbable journey through life began at an African orphanage where the other kids ruthlessly called her "Fat Mary." It was hurtful, but she found an unlikely way to cope.

"I had no one to talk to about my personal issues, so I took that detested name and made Fat Mary my friend and consoler," said Nhambu. "Her job was to listen to me and take all of my childhood emotions and keep them for me until I could understand them."

That was just one of the indignities Nhambu endured growing up in the mixed-race Tanzanian orphanage. But, somehow, all of the abuse and hardships made her even more dignified, a trait the 73-year-old Delray Beach resident carries to this day.

"I never let the bullying define me," she said. "I knew that it would end. I don't regret it. All of my experiences are a part of me. My spirit is my pain, my suffering, my joy...they are the threads of the tapestry that is my life."

She's woven those threads into a memoir called the *Dancing Soul Trilogy*. The first book, *Africa's Child*, was published in May and recounts her heart-breaking youth at the orphanage run by strict German nuns, but Nhambu found a way to unbridle her spirit.

"Dancing helped me to survive," she says. "I'd go into the bathroom to dance because I wanted to dance the African way, not the German waltz

that the nuns taught us."

She hasn't stopped dancing yet. In fact, Nhambu created a 16-level fitness program based on African dance. It's called *Aerobics of the Soul*, and she recently made her annual trip to a spa in Tecate, Mexico, to teach a two-week session despite wearing a boot for a broken foot and ankle.

"I did the best I could do with the boot," she said with a laugh. "I wasn't going to let it stop me."

Nhambu preaches that we should all strive to live our dreams. She's proof it can happen, and she's anxious to spread the word through *Africa's Child* and the rest of the trilogy.

"It's a human story, and the human race doesn't change," said the mom of two, who's now expecting her third grandchild. "We all deal with the same issues. The problems I faced as a child—sexual abuse, bullying, the inadequacies of education, racial issues, parenthood, adoption—are all relevant today."

Meanwhile, she's hard at work promoting her memoir at book clubs, on radio shows, through a website and wherever else she can.

"At my age, I'm starting a whole new career as an author," she said. "It's the last thing I ever dreamt, but here I am, learning the ropes as I go."

"*Africa's Child* is a book of hope. I feel as though I was spared to serve as an inspiration to people who suffer as I have suffered, and to let them know that, somehow, there is a way out."

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