



YUNUS MOHAMED/DIE BUREN/MAAGS24

'She is so brave.

She has inspired us'

They live only 400 m from the spot where on Guy Fawkes' night in 2006 she was raped, hit on the head with a rock, stabbed and thrown into a fire.

Every day she waits for her ride to school in the same street she ran along, engulfed by flames, almost two years ago.

"We were lucky the ambulance arrived in minutes," her mom says. "I couldn't touch her. It looked as though the skin on the right side of her face had burnt away."

Little Rock is concentrating on her pencil drawing of butterflies. She's in Grade 3, she says and appropriately her favourite – and best – subject is life orientation. She has a certificate to prove it.

She attends a private school in the city. "No one knows where she goes to school," her mom says. "There she's just another schoolgirl. She wants to get on with her life as normally as possible."

"I like school," Little Rock says, a dimple peeping out as she smiles. "I'm glad the court thing is over. It wasn't nice."

Her father echoes her feelings. His daughter's attacker did painting work with him for years and was a friend.

"We trusted him. He often walked to the shop with the kids. I don't know what came over him that day. Why her? Why didn't he rather pick on us?"

"My son and I went looking for him afterwards. If we'd found him he might be dead."

"We've always been a close family but since this happened we're even closer," Little Rock's mom says. "We had to get to know one another again. Sometimes she still gets aggressive and blames everyone around her for what happened. She fights with me. But she's seeing a court-appointed therapist."

She decided not to run away and chose to raise her daughter and other children in the place where the crime occurred. "I want to show her it's not the community that's bad but some of the people in it."

She dreams of a bigger house for her family. She receives a disability grant and her husband is a painter. "We do the best with what we have. I try to make this little house a home."

THE way in which Little

Rock's mother has handled the terrible attack is one of the main reasons her daughter is so resilient, experts say.

"The fact her mother believed and supported her has contributed to her quick recovery," Professor Caroline Clauss-Ehlers says. She's a researcher in the field of children and resilience at Rutgers University in New Jersey, America.

"The most important reason kids fight back is a positive relationship with at least one adult. In Little Rock's case it seems to be her mother. It's especially a mother's reaction to a daughter's sexual abuse that determines the child's resilience.

"Mothers often don't believe their daughters when they say they've been raped or molested, which makes the child feel it was her fault. Believing and supporting the child empowers her."

Little Rock's mom's work in the community – she tells other women about their experience – shows she can give meaning to what happened by providing positive input in other people's lives.

"Her mother's activism turns her story into an inspiring one and spreads the word that children who go through trauma like this don't have to be scarred for life."

Psychologically it's a miracle Little Rock is doing so well, says Pretoria Child Trauma Clinic clinical psychologist Marita Rademeyer.

"Research shows that resilient kids have certain things in common irrespective of their culture and the circumstances of their trauma, she says.

Resilient children feel good about themselves and can manage their emotions. They can express themselves in a socially acceptable way. They know what their talents are and they're often encouraged to use them.

This resilience can be taught from birth to the age of five. "Resilient children have routine and predictability in their lives; rituals such as a story every night before bed, having breakfast as a family before school or dinner together at night," she says.

"Little Rock is so brave. She's an inspiration. She has inspired us with her determination," says Malvern de Bruyn, community leader and founder of the Klein Rots trust fund.

The trust was established to help Little Rock financially and emotionally in the future and to support other children through their court cases.

"Like the women who marched on the Union Buildings to protest the Pass Laws, Little Rock was prepared to get out of that fire and fearlessly grab life with both hands," he says.

It's no wonder this fragile little girl has become the rock on which despairing communities can begin rebuilding their hopes for the future.

■ **The Klein Rots trust fund is held at Absa. Account number: 9109429386. Branch code: 632005.** □

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* THE FAMILY'S IDENTITY HAS NOT BEEN REVEALED IN ORDER TO PROTECT THE UNDERAGE VICTIM.

MAIN PICTURE: Plucky Little Rock can look forward to a bright future thanks to the support of family and benefactors. ABOVE The nine-year-old, who wears a long black veil to protect her identity, is supported at the court in Cape Town by community leader Anne Siroky shortly after her assailant was jailed for 28 years. RIGHT: Little Rock with her parents.



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