As a child, life was simple. I lived with my mother, played a lot, and laughed enormously. We didn't have much - very few clothes and possessions. I was the youngest and my siblings were all working. When I was seven, I began helping my sister - learning the work of a maid at the house where she was employed. I'd come and go, come and go - watching how she worked and what she did.

I really wanted to go to school like the other children my age, but we didn't have the resources for it. I also didn't enter school at the appropriate time, and then it was too late. I was too old.

I cried a lot about this. I desperately wanted to go to school. Sometimes when I was upset, my mother would tell me that she would send me to a French school. She'd basically tell me anything so that I'd stop crying. I realise now that she was just leading me on, trying to pacify me.

When I was 11 years old, a lady came to my mother and said that she needed someone to take care of her baby. I was sent to help, and raised the baby for three-and-a-half years. I was 14 when my sister got married and left the family she had been working for. I was sent in her place to work as the full-time maid. I was scared on my first day because I didn't really know the people I was going to work for. It was all new to me - new work, new people, a whole new environment.

I didn't like the work. It wasn't what I had envisaged for my life at all. I had imagined learning, doing something. I wanted at least to get a diploma, the simplest form of education, but that was not to be. I would go eagerly to the church in the afternoons, where they taught me to crochet and to read and write. But unfortunately I couldn't pursue even this education any further. I had to work as my siblings had done.

If any mother or father wanted to send their daughter into servitude, I would tell them a thousand times, don't do it. Not solely because she loses her freedom - she loses that she is a human being, has a personality, and is of value. When a girl is a maid, it is like she is moved by remote control. She is prohibited from lots of things, the simplest being education. She is also prohibited from being married like other girls. She gets exposed to humiliation and a constant lack of privacy.

It is complicated for me as I am still unmarried, I am still a 'girl'. I am from Upper Egypt - a conservative, rural area of the country. It is culturally inappropriate and shameful for a woman to be in her 40s and living alone. My siblings are insistent on my marrying so that I will be taken off their hands. I am their responsibility - if I marry, that responsibility will be passed on to a husband.

I dreamed of getting married as a child. I also had a dream of living in America. I had why I persevered to the end with my employers. They started working on my paperwork to migrate there, but then their kids went to America and they wanted someone to stay and look after them. Someone to be their third child and care for them. So I didn't end up going.

I was 39 years old when my employers passed away, and I was set free. The difference in my life is huge. It is like the difference between heaven and earth. I am now a paid employee, baking for a coffee shop. I am able to make decisions and to express my opinion. Not just sweeping floors and carrying our mundane jobs. Working in home is not bad in itself. But when someone controls your life, then it becomes too difficult. I hope that I will continue working for this company. I want to constantly improve.

I would like to keep seeing the joy in my employers' eyes when they see me improve - when they are surprised by what I have accomplished. I know that they will be full of joy from their heart, because they took someone from absolutely nothing at all, and taught her how to grow - like a baby who is taking her first steps in learning how to walk.

LETTER FROM CAIRO: AYA

by Charmayne Allison

I grew up different from the girls at my school. I didn’t have many boundaries or restrictions. I looked up to my mother. She was a very strong character who didn’t care what people thought of her. She was also a working woman. I figured out later that she struggled, working and taking care of me and my dad at the same time. But she never made me feel like she was struggling. She made sure I felt that everything was natural and together.

From a young age, I was pushed away from the girls’ group at school. I found that I just didn’t fit in at all. Mum would always tell me, “Don’t worry about what other people think of you - as long as you’re doing what you feel is right.”

But then my mum saw that I was left out all the time, so she threw me a big birthday party and asked all the kids from school to come. She gave them toys and sweets. So the kids came, they took the toys, they played with me while my mum was there - and then they left as soon as my mum left.

In my teenage years, I had big clashes with her. She was like, “I brought you up to be independent, and now you are. You’re so independent.” We are like this, though. We strive to surpass our parents. They want to bring us up to turn out like them, but then we become more advanced. So they get scared - they get scared that something will happen to us because they’ve never experienced the extremes that we’re going through.

So my mum was really scared, and she gave me a hard time through my teenage years. The pressure became too much, and I left to live alone. I moved from my hometown of Alexandria to Cairo and I travelled a lot and lived in different places around the world. And my dad was like, “How do you do that?” Because he’d never travelled like that. Like many other Egyptian men, he went to Saudi Arabia and he came back. And my mum went to Bulgaria once because she was in the national basketball team. She fought for the trip, and she was always telling us about this only trip she made in her life - and it was in the Soviet Union. But for me as a child, she had travelled somewhere else, and that was magical.

I questioned the authority of men since I was little. They were allowed to do everything, and we girls were supposed to sit down and watch them. I wanted to play freely - I thought, “I’m a person, aren’t I?” So I started competing in karate. Small boys in Egypt are so arrogant about being boys! I was like, “Whatever, I’m gonna kick your butt.”

Sometimes I will see people standing in front of my artwork and trying to understand it. For me this is priceless. Life is such an endless cycle. You go from a 9-5 job to weekends and back again. And art makes us stop and think. And this is the magic I think - it takes you back to nature, to your feelings and everything that’s beautiful.

I want to be happy. I think change is a big part of that. I learned this from the great men and women who changed the world. Those people, when they had injustice in their town or country, left for a while. They roamed somewhere far away from the problem, and when the time was right, they returned and changed everything. This inspired me to do the same. It’s not good to stay in the same place. You need to remove yourself from the problem, look at it from a distance, and then think, “Okay, am I going to solve this or not?” So this inspired me to step outside of my comfort zone and leave Alexandria and go somewhere else. Which has been very challenging for me, because Cairo can be a very cruel place. But if I can survive here, I can survive anywhere.
LETTER FROM CAIRO: MARYAM

by Charmaine Allison

My parents are Egyptian, but they immigrated to Germany 38 years ago. I was born in Bonn, and Bonn is all literature and languages. When I graduated from school, art was my passion. So I thought, OK, I’m going to another country. And so I decided to study in Egypt.

My first two years were awful, to be honest. Although Egypt is just four hours from Germany, they are entirely different worlds. All I knew of Egypt was the touristy world.

In Germany I had never been confronted with poverty. Here, I felt helpless because I didn’t see anyone doing anything to address the poverty. I then met Ragida El Ebrashi, the founder of Alashaneke Ya Balady. I told her I couldn’t stay in Egypt any more. I told her that it wasn’t what I expected. She told me, “You know nothing about Egypt. You haven’t seen anything.”

We took the car and we went to a marginalised area. We drove through a completely cracked street, and the community swarmed around her car. She set up a desk in a tiny apartment, and the people came to see her one by one - asking for microloans to start new projects. I listened to stories such as a mother who complained about her teenage son. He wasn’t himself any more - throwing things, he was loud and aggressive towards his mother and family. She didn’t know what to do. The mother said her son was taking medicine to help him sleep, prescribed by a doctor. Ragida looked at the prescription and realised that it was the cause of the son’s aggression.

Over the following weeks, I began working for Alashaneke Ya Balady as a volunteer. I documented everything through pictures, writing, publicising; I developed the website, brochures, flyers, whatever I was able to do. Once the four weeks were over, I stayed. I know this is what I want to do - I want to see change in Egypt.

We have about 45,000 NGOs in Egypt. And only a few get to the root of the problem, changing people with education, with microloans. You can give people donations and you can give them food - but this does not bring about lasting change. Many charitable organisations don’t work. They just give things out and people get used to this. No actual change happens.

There is a memory from the revolution that I will never forget. It was on the 28th of January, three days after it began. We called it the Friday of Anger, when the revolution spread to all the people. On that day all the borders of Cairo closed, and there was a curfew - people could not get into Cairo or get out. We had to stay at home.

On that day I received a phone call from a bus of volunteers. They had been out of town on a camp and could not re-enter Cairo. They did not know where to stay. I lived in a suburb at the entrance of Cairo named El Rehab. I was staying at my uncle’s house at that time. I told the volunteers that they could sleep at my place.

I returned to my house the next day and it was a scene I will never forget. I found the entire neighbourhood in my house. They had heard the sound of the 40 volunteers and they thought, “It’s the safest place because there are so many people.” The men were standing out the front of the house. The women were inside: There were old people, young people - an old lady was praying, girls were crying, others were watching the news - and the guys were outside guarding a house they didn’t even own. It was just so wonderful to see all of those people in one place. They were all united in my house.

A lot of foreigners left Egypt at that time because it was dangerous. My parents told me, “You have to get out and come back to Germany.” And I said, “I’m not going to leave them now - because this is where all the change is happening.”

I believe it is important to use what you are most passionate about to make change in the community. It is essential to work for your community - you can’t just work for yourself - giving back, even if you feel like you are receiving nothing in return.