

SKATING OFFERED THALENTE BIYELA AN ESCAPE FROM DRUG ADDICTION AND A TICKET TO LA

ON BOARD



TEXT: ROB PETERS; PHOTOGRAPHY: JACQUELINE BURGESS

‘Skating wasn’t just a cool thing I did with my friends; it became part of my life,’ Thalente Biyela says of the sport that took him all the way from living on the streets of Durban to rubbing shoulders with pro skaters in Los Angeles, California.

The 20-year-old’s journey began almost 10 years ago. After losing his mother, he ran away to escape an abusive stepfather – and a ‘dodgy’ neighbourhood in South Beach, Durban – and found himself on the streets at the age of just 11. He would spend the next six or seven years without a roof over his head, hustling to get by.

He found his spiritual home at Durban Beachfront Skate Park in North Beach, where what first began as something to do with his friends soon became a way of life. But he admits that his lifestyle has ‘worked both ways’.

While skating served to keep him away from trouble, it also found him mixing with the wrong crowd. With no support system or guidance to speak of, Thalente eventually started smoking heroin and just ‘doing stupid s***’.

But while he could have spiralled out of control and found himself beyond saving, Thalente did have good friends who made sure he got the support he needed to pull himself back from the brink.

The skater credits the local pro surfer Tammy-Lee Smith with getting him off the streets and ‘turning his life around’. He describes Tammy as his ‘best-friend-slash-sister-slash-mother’ – even as we chat over the phone, it’s clear how much affection he has for her.

‘Tammy just wanted me to turn my life around, she wanted to see me succeed, but it was very hard. I took a good three years [to get off drugs]. I would get off it for a week, get back on it, get off, get back on... Eventually I saw the big picture. I always knew there was more to the life I was living – there is something more out there.’

Thalente then began making a name for himself on the local skating scene, but to really break out, he needed to make the big move. Tammy reached out to a friend, filmmaker Natalie Johns, in Los Angeles. She saw the potential in the young street kid and helped get him to LA by virtue of a documentary on his remarkable story.

Just as skating put Thalente on the right path, he knows it also presents him with an opportunity. He can use it to not only enrich his own life further, but also help other kids who find themselves in the same position he once was. But first, he wants to kick-start his education, something he missed out on while on the street.

‘Short term – reading and writing, basic maths, and try to get my driver’s licence,’ he says. ‘Long term, I just want to skate and be involved in skating. Give back what I can and hopefully help people one day in the way that I have been helped.’

Remarkably, Thalente’s story is only just beginning. But it already has the makings of an epic one. **Man**