





SHELTER: Owen Mgaji, 25, a homeless man who stays among the bushes near the M5, takes refuge under a bridge and tries to keep warm.
PICTURE: JEFFREY ABRAHAM



WORLDS APART: While some people make their way to work, this homeless man sleeps opposite the Castle in Cape Town.
PICTURE: COURTNEY AFRICA

A year on, feeling more 'at home'

It's amazing what happens when the good people of Cape Town assist the homeless

Danny's Diary



By Danny Oosthuizen

JUST over a year ago, the journey started. Never did I imagine it would have such a huge impact. Bigger than we ever expected. People from as far away as Canada made contact with me. The formula was straightforward: to engage with the citizens of Cape Town. To create awareness. Issues like showers, sanitary pads, drinking water and a safe space were mentioned.

Bear in mind that I am not a journalist; it was a huge challenge.

Would they understand? Would they find the time to listen and engage? The answer was yes. My inbox on the first day was filled with well-wishes. And it kept coming. People recognised me on the street. Funny thing is, I was constantly sad. I cried a lot. I guess gratitude for this positive response from the public overwhelmed me.

My first big public appearance was with Sun International. And as time went by I was more relaxed when doing advocacy. I had a huge responsibility towards the homeless. I kept on sleeping outside so I still stayed connected. I also made a point of going around people and business that supported me while I was the homeless guy.

I had to be in touch with Social Development, Law Enforcement, the CCTD, etc and tackle issues relating to the homeless. I had to realise the "red tape" we have to deal with. Certain issues were making me feel utmost frustration, but I had good people around me as mentors so I could handle it most of the times. Even controversial issues, I dissect for the public in detail. Drug use, sex work, theft, relationship issues, etc. Some members of the public could identify with some of the issues.

All in all, I had good feedback. I started



MAKING DO: Homeless people living under Lansdowne bridge. Pictured are Lansirt van Reenen and her 4-year-old daughter, Asia.
PICTURE: TRACEY ADAMS



CLEANING UP: A homeless man washes himself on a field in District Six.
PICTURE: HENK KRUGER

to realise I need to meet role-players face to face. Meet the human behind the title. Behind the job title is a human being. I deal with the human. It was on a Sunday. People at the office gave me this "what the hell, you should be sleeping late" look, but I had JP on my mind. Yes, that one... Alderman JP Smith, mayco member for safety and security and social services. I wanted to meet the man in person.

So I sat down, got up again, made a coffee and went for a smoke. I let the wording run in my mind. JP is a busy man, so can't come across like I'm going to waste his time. I sent him a mail and in less than 10 minutes I had a reply. Meeting 10 May at 10.15. His office. Awesome. Next panic attack: What to wear! I got a black jacket and pants from the U-Turn shop on Riebeeck Street. Very corporate, I must say.

JP was nothing like I expected. Business-like but friendly. Approachable. We got straight to the issues I wanted to clarify: The Winter Readiness Programme. This year it will run from May 15 until September 15. All Haven shelters and most of the others will take part. The Haven shelters are conducting HIV/TB tests at the shelters and there is also soft-skill development training taking place.

An extra R15 million is allocated towards the homeless. EPWP work is also going to take off in the near future.

Here comes the best part: the city is creating a safe space! It will be in Culemborg. Development should start in September this year. People would be able to sleep, prepare meals, do laundry, etc. It will be a fenced-off area. There will also be lockers where property can be locked away. People here will also get an opportunity to join work programmes. It will be wheelchair-accessible.

Families with children will also find a space here. There will be security provided. JP said that one should move away from policing to social development. As one can see, Social Development is committed. And with Lorraine Frost as acting co-ordinator for street people, an open and solid working relationship can be achieved.

With all said, we, the homeless, have a history of being over-promised and under-delivered. So we have a tendency to not take anybody seriously. But after this meeting I have high hopes. And JP's willingness to go out and engage directly with the homeless is a good sign. We all have to come to the party.

Danny Oosthuizen is a homeless person living in Cape Town, an ambassador for The Dignity Project, a social activist and HIV/TB counsellor.

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