



Publication: People s Post Mitchells Plain - Main
Title: Life is really about the choices we make
Publish date: 13 Jun 2023
Page: 2

Reach: 50000
AVE:R 39532.33
Author: KAYLYNNE BANTOM

Life is really about the choices we make

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A journo's voice

"May light always be on your path." This was a parting shot from a man living on the streets whom I met recently.

"Same to you, sir," I responded as I walked away.

It was a busy Tuesday afternoon and I found myself outside the Castle of Good Hope in the Cape Town Central Business District (CBD).

For the past few years, a group of people have been occupying a piece of land outside the Castle. I went there to interview some of the occupants.

As journalists, we're subjected to all kinds of situations and meet people from all walks of life.

This day was no other.

As I approached one of the few dozen tents erected there I saw Gakiem, who was sitting on a brick staring into the distance.

I greeted him, he greeted me back and we started talking.

Gakiem and his wife had been living there for the past few years.

I asked him how they ended up there. "I made some wrong choices," he said, as he began to share his life story.

He had a job and lived in a house with his family. But things turned sour when he became addicted to heroin.

Soon one of Gakiem's friends joined us. I didn't get his name. As I asked Gakiem questions his friend chimed in as well.

They shared how their drug addiction got the better of them, on most days to the point where they resorted to crime to feed their habit.

"Have you considered seeking

help?" I asked.

Gakiem answered honestly and said he didn't have the willpower yet.

We spoke for almost 40 minutes.

Gakiem's friend got up from the empty paint container he was sitting on and apologised to me for not offering me a seat.

"Where are my manners?" he said, blowing the dust off the container so I could sit on it, which I did and the conversation continued.

They reminisced about their life before the streets and drugs, and cracked a few jokes. We laughed.

I thought Gakiem's story about leaving Ratanga Junction, a former amusement park in Century City, with just one shoe because it fell from his foot while he was on the Cobra ride was hilarious.

For a few minutes I forgot I

was sitting in a circle with two men who confessed they robbed and stole from people to survive.

The saying goes "don't judge a book by its cover", but I must admit I did not expect to have the insightful conversation I had with them.

Neither did Gakiem, for that matter. He confessed: "Usually when people ask me questions I ask them how much money they are going to give me. But it was the way you approached me that made me decide I was not going to do that."

Life on the street is tough. I don't think I will ever see the two of them again. But I was reminded of three life lessons when I left: we all have a story; respect goes a long way; life is about the choices we make.

I hope and pray they both find the willpower to become rehabilitated. May light always be on their path too.



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AVE:R 17011.37
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"It is not that they are homeless. When I look at the feeding programmes, the amount of people coming out of all areas there are lines of 200 people plus, dependent on social relief. It is a challenge," he says.

There are already around 12 residents interested in joining the group, with a few already trained.

"This will be a team of volunteers living in the community that has an understanding of substance use disorders, but also has a passion for

people living on the street."

Specifically on the topic of persons on the street as a result of drugs, Potts says people don't understand how to help them.

"I know because I have worked in the sector for many years as a drug treatment specialist," he says.

"This unit will help people understand how to engage with persons living on the street."

All councillors in Subcouncil 17 have been informed of the initiative and Ward 81 will be used as a case study to hopefully implement this further in the associated wards.

Potts says while the City of Cape

Town has a dedicated unit, the ward unit can and will be active in the area daily - which is what is needed at this time, he says.

Experts have been brought in to engage stakeholders on how best to spend and distribute funding allocated to the project.

Potts says families need to first force the process of rehabilitation, before they can reconcile or engage with their loved ones as the person again.

While the exact number of persons living on the street is largely unknown, pending the result of the recent census, the City

engaged with 2 700 persons in March alone.

Ahead of winter, the City is also bolstering the services of several shelters. No shelter exists in the Mitchell's Plain area and residents are referred to shelters outside the area.

In a recent statement, Hill-Lewis said the City would assist local shelters in creating 294 temporary bed spaces at four shelters in the metro.

"Besides our support for NPOs, the City will spend R230m over three years to expand and operate our own Safe Space transitional

shelters. These facilities currently offer around 700 beds in the CBD and Bellville, along with a range of social interventions to reintegrate people into society. Our expansion plans include the proposed 300-bed safe space in Green Point," says Hill-Lewis in the statement.

The City will also provide non-perishable foodstuff, cleaning materials, hygiene packs, mattresses, linen and blankets to these shelters, along with 184 Expanded Public Works Programme workers.

Another engagement with residents interested in joining the unit will be held next week.