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# 'This is a full-circle moment for me'

KAYLYNNE BANTOM

**Vernon Gordon's life is a true testament that life is what you make of it. In 2015, Gordon's addiction to drugs saw him homeless and living on the streets in Camps Bay.**

During this time, he was at times forced to scratch bins for food. A period he describes as the "lowest point" in his life.

The father of four would never have imagined that eight years later, he would be site manager of the Safe Space Shelter 1 on Nelson Mandela Boulevard in the City Bowl.

Gordon (50), originally from Bishop Lavis, says while living in Camps Bay he would guard cars hoping to make a few rands to buy food.

On good days he would make a few tips, but on difficult days he would get nothing.

"In winter, there would be few cars. And sometimes people didn't tip us. Then I would have to scratch in bins for food. That was the saddest part for me. Because I knew that wasn't how I was raised."

He explains that in June 2019, he decided to accept help from the City's social development teams that offered him assistance and alternative accommodation options.

"By this time, I couldn't handle life on the street anymore. I had suicidal thoughts but never had the courage to do it. I was happy when the social workers came there and offered help because I didn't know

where to go for help."

Gordon says he immediately grabbed the opportunity to get off the streets.

"They offered us jobs through the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP). I accepted the accommodation offer and was moved to Safe Space Shelter 1. I was still using drugs at the time, so I joined the rehabilitation programme."

Gordon explains that the rehabilitation was a 16-week programme that he attended twice a week.

He says, while attending the programme, he decided to pay it forward and offered to become a field worker through the City's Social Development Department.

"I wanted to encourage other people to get off the street as well. Following my volunteering, I was offered an eight-month contract as a fieldworker and earned a stipend. I didn't use that money, I saved it. After the eight months, I had about R20 000 in my bank account."

According to Gordon, in December 2019, he moved to The Haven Night Shelter in Green Point, where he lived for three months.

During this time, the country went into hard lockdown to curb the Covid-19 pandemic.

Gordon was then offered a position as host at the Strandfontein Covid-19 homeless camp for about two months.

Desperate not to return to the street, Gordon approached a friend who helped him find another job and a place to live.

**"I thought I was going to die on the street."**

- Vernon Gordon

According to Gordon, he was able to use some of his savings to put down a deposit for an apartment.

"I am grateful for the people who have supported and helped me through my journey to recovery. Fiona Bosch journeyed with me throughout. My family closed their doors, but some people continued to journey with me."

Gordon says with Bosch's assistance he was offered the position as house father at the Paint City Safe Space in Bellville, a position he held for two years.

Theresa Masaglia, a co-founder of Ignisive – ignite inclusive change, a Camps Bay organisation that supports people living on the street, describes Gordon's life story as an inspiration.

"There is nothing more inspiring than to see him picking himself up and how he motivated himself, he made responsible choices. To hear Vernon and to see what he has achieved are so encouraging to anyone who ever thinks some things are impossible.

He is an example of what is possible when someone who is struggling commit and is empowered to make a change for themselves."

In April last year, Gordon was promoted to site manager at Safe Space Shelter 1 to oversee the day-



Vernon Gordon now devotes his time to giving back. PHOTO: KAYLYNNE BANTOM

to-day running of the shelter.

Gordon says life on the streets is tough, but he is proud of his achievements.

"I am proud of myself. I can't explain the feeling. I never saw my life like this now. I thought I was going to die on the street. This is a full-circle moment for me because I started at this shelter as a resident.

"I can now help and encourage other people who are still struggling. I have been there; I know what it is like. I recently helped someone get a job and that made me happy. I feel good when I can help someone."

Gordon says support from people is what kept him motivated during the dark times he was facing.

"People I met while living on the street would always encourage me to not give up. Theresa Masaglia,

whom I met in Camps Bay, would always speak positivity over my life. My boss is also always motivating me."

He says reuniting with his family has been a major accomplishment.

"I remember in 2021 I went to visit my mom in Johannesburg. It was an emotional reunion because we haven't seen each other in 15 years. I was happy that she could see me no longer on drugs."

Gordon says he decided to take charge of his life to set a good example for his four boys.

He encourages those still finding themselves on the street and addicted to drugs to seek help.

"If you need help, you must ask. You must take the first step. Nobody will help you unless you help yourself. There is still hope. It is not the end of the world."