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Mandela Month: Food garden digs into change

This Mandela Day, the Life-Changing Garden at MES Safe Space in Bellville was alive with action and purpose. While volunteers planted seeds and harvested produce, they also helped grow their skills, dignity, and foster lasting change. Mr Dean William Macpherson, Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure, attended the event, adding his support to the day's impactful activities.

Led by the Greater Tygerberg Partnership (GTP), in collaboration with the EPR Waste Association of South Africa (eWASA) and facilitated by Call 2 Care, these teams rolled up their sleeves for Mandela Day. They worked side by side with members of the homeless community who tend the garden daily. Together, they planted seasonal vegetables, harvested fresh crops for the MES kitchen, and donated essential tools and seedlings to help expand the garden's reach.

"The Life-Changing Garden is proof that with the right partnerships, we can transform neglected spaces into places of purpose that feed people, restore hope and create real opportunities. This Mandela Day, we didn't just celebrate Madiba's legacy, but we lived it, and in doing so, we've helped ensure that Bellville continues changing for good," said Warren Hewitt, CEO of GTP.

As a symbol of their contribution to both community and the environment, each volunteer received a locally propagated Spekboom, a hardy, carbon-storing plant native to South Africa. The event formed part of a collaborative drive to unlock Bellville's potential through place-making, sustainability, and social innovation. It's an example of how community-focused partnerships can create lasting change, one square metre at a time.

"This initiative aligns with eWASA's values of



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sustainability and skills development. We are proud to be part of a Mandela Day effort that delivers real impact and equips individuals with tools to grow their futures both metaphorically and literally," said Etienne Basson, national project manager at eWASA.

Since its inception in October 2021, the previous Changing Garden has been a beacon of hope for the homeless and vulnerable populations. Initially developed by a resident at Christian-based organisation Mould Empower Serve (MES), in collaboration with GTP, the garden empowers individuals holistically to live independent, sustainable, and meaningful lives, generating income, improving health and nutrition, and encouraging community members to start their own food gardens.

The Life-Changing Garden continues to grow vegetables and pride. Maintained by members

of the local homeless community, the garden is a space of transformation, providing work, structure, and practical skills in sustainable agriculture. It currently supplies fresh produce to the MES kitchen and local buyers while empowering its caretakers with valuable knowledge and a renewed sense of purpose.

The vision of GTP is to develop and manage the site using organic and sustainable practices throughout, and where possible, to incorporate a social enterprise business model to operate successful programmes. Additionally, the organisation facilitates composting services to the garden, enriching the soil with essential nutrients, promoting environmental stewardship and enhancing food security.

"The urban farming training programme has been a wonderful success. It's an ideal skills develop-

ment opportunity for homeless people and a chance for the wider community to get more involved. Here, they learn to plant, grow, tend, and harvest, gaining vital life and work skills that can lead toward a new, more positive direction in life," Hewitt concludes.

Using a ridge-and-ditch system that maximises soil health and water retention, the garden shows that even small, overlooked spaces can become thriving hubs of productivity and hope.

There are also plans to enhance the space's visual appeal, transforming it from purely functional to an inspirational, welcoming green environment that reflects the pride and possibility it represents. With continued support, the Life-Changing Garden could become a flagship example of what inclusive, sustainable urban development can look like in cities across South Africa.

