South African Youths:

Course Teaches Young Offenders That There is a Better Way

By Lesley Ann Tinntinger

When Simon Kunene and Colin Nkabinde walk down the streets of Blairgowrie, a middle-class suburb in Johannesburg, South Africa, they are vigilant. They make sure they constantly watch each other’s backs. It’s not that this area is particularly crime-ridden; it’s just that having spent their youths as robbers, they know what’s out there.

In fact, Kunene, 23, and Nkabinde, 22, who both have served several years in prison for their crimes, now have dedicated their lives to convincing youngsters not to turn to crime.

Crime in South Africa

With an estimated 70 percent to 80 percent of convicted offenders relapsing into habitual crime, these two young men are fairly unusual. However, they are not alone in their quest. If they, along with a group of 30 other former offenders, have their way, many young offenders will leave crime behind once they are released.

The latest information from the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) is that there are 12,000 (in a total prison population of 164,000) youthful offenders in South African prisons today.

Change Catalysts

Kunene and Nkabinde were the first “graduates” of an innovative personal transformation program called “Khulisa” (a Zulu word that means “let the child grow”), which originally was pioneered in Leeuwkop Juvenile Prison, north of Johannesburg, more than two years ago. Since its inception, more than 400 youthful offenders have participated in Khulisa, which was introduced only as a pilot program.

From an original group of 40 volunteers, 22 have been released. Eleven now form a team of “change catalysts,” seven of whom have been on parole for more than a year. Only two, from a selection of 16 candidates, have recidivated. By the end of this month, the group will exceed 20.

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Each group member, after his or her release, has undergone in-depth therapy, as well as training in communication and public presentation skills, to ensure that his or her desire to make reparation is received attentively, not only in the corporate sector, but also by communities at all levels. In addition, each group member has received lessons on “ubuntu,” the philosophy of the African people, which states that “a person is only a person through other people.”

Meaningful Employment

Corrective Action Holdings (CAH) is a marketing organization focusing on projects that are culturally based and aimed at uplifting disadvantaged communities. Kunene, Nkabinde and three other parolees work full time in the CAH offices.

Kunene, front office manager and “in-house storyteller,” cannot even remember how many cars he has stolen. “I remember when I tried to hijack a car and pointed a firearm at the victim,” he says of the incident that led to his first conviction in 1994.

The second time he was caught, Kunene received a five-year suspended sentence, of which he served one month in prison. In 1996, he was sentenced to four years. He volunteered to take part in the Khulisa program, thinking it might help him. “I then realized I could do many things other than crime,” he says. “I learned about moral values and I became afraid of what I had done. What if it was I who had parked the car and then came back to find it gone? I might have become a victim and been violated.”

Kunene now goes back to Leeuwkop every week as a facilitator, implementing Khulisa life skills programs. He, along with other parolees, addresses multiple groups that range from corporate clients, government and places of safety to communities and schools, spreading the message of change.

Nkabinde feels lucky as well. He was an armed robber and also cannot recall the number of times he committed crimes. He was convicted in 1996 and sentenced to four years, two of which he served. It was only when he was in prison that he realized how much his family meant to him and how foolish he had been not to listen to his mother’s warnings.

When the Khulisa program was introduced, Nkabinde volunteered. “I
learned a lot about myself through writing and drama — I never knew I had talent," he says. "I regret what I did and dream of being recognized by my community and South Africa as one of those people who helped to reduce the high crime rate."

A New Concept In Life Skills

Essentially, Khulisa is comprised of two programs. The first, Usiko (meaning heritage) combines storytelling with multifaceted life skills activities in an attempt to restore self-respect and a sense of responsibility among young people at risk and in conflict with the law. Traditional stories, focusing on values and morals, are the entry point to a variety of outcome-based life skills exercises. Visual arts, drama, dance and musical activities highlight the inspirational and educational messages in the stories. The second program, "This is My Path," focuses on serious creative writing (journals and exercises) and often leads to self-discovery. The program also allows for transformation and development through experiential learning and is based on three, three-month self-study modules with weekly facilitated group discussions.

The courses have been developed and written through facilitation and cooperation between inmates and professionals in penology, corrections, education and psychology. They have been tested and monitored on a scientific basis in partnership with the University of South Africa (UNISA), in various prisons, schools and communities in South Africa. The courses are presented in two literacy levels and are to be translated into different languages.

A supplementary course in training skills (a train-the-trainer course) is designed to conform to the principles of the National Qualifications Framework and the standards as proposed by the South African Education, Training and Development Practices to ensure credibility and portability. It also conforms to the syllabus of the City and Guilds International Certificate in training skills.

UNISA educationalist Dr. Lita Beekman, who has been instrumental in the program is development, states, "The strategies and methods used place a premium on the learner's imagination and mind power."

Cries Without Tears

Recently, Cries Without Tears, a book of anecdotes written by young offenders who have participated in the creative writing self-guided therapy course at Leeuwkop and other prisons was compiled. Sad tales of loneliness in and out of jail, rejection from society, and the pain they had caused their parents and loved ones were just some of the poignant sagas documented by the youths.

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The book, upon which a 20-minute documentary has been made, together with a multimedia interactive CD, is being used as a tool in the crime prevention program presented by the group among a variety of organizations and falls under the auspices of the Department of Welfare. The publication is so powerful that the Department of Foreign Affairs is in the process of distributing it to all South African missions worldwide in order to provide an alternative perspective on youthful offenders and South Africa's crime problem.

Forging Partnerships With Government

CAH has forged a partnership with the National Youth Commission, a statutory body of government that reports directly to, and was originally appointed by, President Thabo Mbeki.

The National Youth Commission is currently pioneering a rehabilitation and entrepreneurship skills development program in three prisons — Durban Westville (KZN), Thohoyandou (Northern Province) and Hlakwana (Western Cape) — via satellite television. All three institutions fall under control of DCS.

CAH has been appointed to supply the weekly life skills programs as part of a new youthful offender curriculum, as well as to monitor its implementation for the duration of a three-year pilot program to run within the prisons. It also is working on further crime prevention programs with the departments of Arts, Science and Technology, Education, Health, Welfare, Foreign Affairs and the South African Police Services.

Lifelong Learning

After the first democratic election in 1994, the government embarked on a program to transform education and training. The mechanism for transforming education and training is known as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). NQF sets the standards while institutions or education and training providers secure that their programs equip learners with the knowledge, skills and values as described in the standards set by NQF. The advantage of this strategy is that learners can earn qualifications on the basis of their acquired knowledge and skills. The knowledge and skills could have been acquired informally, even without attending a formal learning program.

A further advantage is that any person can compile a portfolio of his or her acquired knowledge and skills and submit it to an institution that can evaluate it and give Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) and accreditation for certain modules or courses.

In South Africa, a South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has been established to oversee the development and the implementation of NQF. SAQA is an independent statutory body consisting of representatives from six "social partners":
government, business, trade unions, education and training providers, critical interest groups (such as the disabled, women, youths or other groups whose presence is believed to be important) and community groups (who may represent learners). It has the authority to set the standards that learners will have to meet in order to earn qualifications and to ensure that the standards are met.

The Khulisa and Usiko programs have been developed along the lines of NQF. The entrepreneurship course stands on its own as a certificate course to create a career path, a portfolio to present for RPL.

The standards to be set will be formulated using a number of concepts drawn from "outcomes-based" education and training.

The Community's Role

It is Khulisa's belief that communities must become responsible for young offenders by recognizing that the problems of the youths reflect the problems of the community. To deal with juvenile crime, all human services in the community must join to build on the strengths of the youths, the family and existing social structures.

Key to the success of the program is the training of communities to provide them with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required to work with people on one hand, and to manage their own lives (work, family, volunteering, social, psychological and physical) on the other hand.

The second focus is on empowering participants with knowledge about community development in general, to understand the dynamics and sensitivities and to identify the roles and actions involved therein.

The aim of the community development program is to empower individuals in the community with knowledge and skills to identify, develop, initiate and manage community development projects aimed at addressing community needs and building capacity within community. Through this involvement, individuals realize their own potential as contributors to the reconstruction of their country.

The fully integrated community building program, which involves incorporating former offenders as well as key stakeholders, was launched in January and will run for one year.

Achievements

In the past two and one-half years, Khulisa has achieved some significant accomplishments on an international scale:

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- SBS, Australia's leading television channel, prepared an international current affairs documentary, titled "A Life Less Fortunate," about the Khulisa program. The documentary subsequently won an award issued by the United Nations in Australia in the Children's Rights category.
- A group of seven parolees have been invited to embark on a two-week youth tour to Australia during the first half of 2000. The purpose of the tour will be to open dialogue between young South Africans and the graduates of an existing custodian program about the worlds in which they live, their differences, and their hopes and dreams for the future. The intention is for both groups to represent their cultures through storytelling, theater, dance, song and poetry.

Thereafter, they will come together for facilitated discussions on what they hope for in their futures, and what they believe that they can achieve together.

- The Dorset Department of Education in the United Kingdom has submitted proposals for the implementation of the Khulisa program during the early part of this year at the Sherborne Learning Centre.
- The Khulisa team has been invited to participate in the National Speakers Association (an organization of 4,000 professional speakers) Convention in Washington, D.C., Aug. 5-8, when, during a portion of its National Convention for a World Congress Year 2000, speakers from other countries will be highlighted.
- The Gauteng Master Builders Association, the representative body of the South African building fraternity, has extended its support in the form of sponsored training in plastering and bricklaying on a module basis for all identified Khulisa program graduates.
- A joint venture between one of South Africa's leading recruitment agencies, the Tower Group, and CAH has been forged. Employment for responsive graduates from the Khulisa program, upon release, will be negotiated as part of their clients' social responsibility program.

The Khulisa program has implications far wider than any individual department or organization's interest. In fact, it integrates the interest of so many stakeholders that it is of international importance.

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