

Hlumelelisa turns prison inmates into horticulturalists

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A former chief inspector of prisons, Albert Fritz, says the lack of rehabilitation programmes and a dominant gang culture ensures that many released prisoners are soon "back behind bars".

Paul Bruns, founder and programme director of Hlumelelisa, a non-Profit Organisation that trains sentenced offenders, parolees and people at risk in practical and theoretical horticultural skills, believes that "growing and up skilling these inmates, enables them to make a positive contribution to communities once they are reintegrated into society"

The programme is designed to encourage learners to work with nature. In so doing, they learn important life skills such as nurturing, patience, commitment and perseverance. By taking responsibility for living plants, they learn to take responsibility for themselves, their environment and their futures. The programme focuses on assisting offenders to regain their humanity and self-respect and to develop a sense of hope.

A former inmate Zwai Ngeshe was a student on the Hlumelelisa project at the Leeuwkop Correctional Facility.

Zwai was arrested in 2009 and was sentenced to serve 3 years at Leeuwkop Correctional Facility. During his time in prison, Zwai heard of Hlumelelisa.

Zwai was initially not accepted for the 9 month Hlumelelisa training programme as he had less than the 9 months still to serve. He was however very persuasive and promised to return to Leeuwkop on his release to complete the programme.

On 29 June 2012 Zwai was released from the Leeuwkop Correctional Facility. True to his word, he returned to the prison on Monday 2nd of July to complete the programme.

Zwai says "Hlumelelisa has changed my life; I am determined to start again, to work with nature and to give back to my society."

Zwai has grabbed this chance with both hands. He is determined to be part of the dream to lift people out of despair and hopelessness.

On graduation Zwai has the opportunity to be accepted to the Hlumelelisa 'train the trainer' programme and then possibly to become a facilitator, assessor and moderator, thus having the opportunity to train other inmates.

Bruns concludes that "All of Hlumelelisa's full time facilitators have come up through the 5 ranks of Hlumelelisa with more than a year of continuous service. They acknowledge that it is the longest permanent employment any of them have ever had. It is evident that opportunities show themselves in the strangest of places."

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