



The Group of Hope started at Brandvlei Maximum Security Prison outside Worcester in 2002. Consisting of 20 male inmates the Group initially helped inmates with AIDS and ran prevention campaigns within the prison but then started reaching out to help orphans, the disabled and the elderly through their adoption, food gardening, sewing and craft and projects. The Group of Hope now operates from Worcester Medium. Under the direst of circumstances – prison sentences of up to 25 years and the most secure prison in the country – these men achieved the unthinkable. They gave hope to 26 AIDS orphans by ‘adopting’ them. The children were brought regularly to the prison where they received material and emotional support from the Group's members. By helping these children and other marginalised people in the nearby communities the inmates also redeemed their own lives. Many people believe offenders should be removed from society and simply locked away forever, but not Mr Jacobus Pansegrouw, a social worker at the prison and co-ordinator of the Group who said, “The guys in this group are genuine. They’re passionate about what they’re doing and have demonstrated their commitment to making a difference.”

The idea for the project came from the prisoners themselves. After attending an HIV and AIDS lecture in 2002, several inmates approached Mr Pansegrouw saying they wanted to help fight the epidemic. With his assistance, a formal group was formed in June 2002 with a proper constitution and an oath of allegiance. They decided to call themselves the Group of Hope. Initially the Group focused on giving talks about HIV and AIDS to fellow inmates and visiting sick prisoners, but they then expressed a desire to try and help people in the community as well. Mr Pansegrouw contacted a local child welfare organisation and put this unusual proposal forward. The organisation said they knew of a boy called Thabang, who had lost both parents to AIDS and could certainly do with help from any source. The Group decided to ‘adopt’ this 12-year-old orphan and he was brought to the prison to meet his 20 new ‘fathers’.

The members were shocked by Thabang’s state of health and dress. He was painfully thin and had sores all round his mouth. His clothes were in tatters. After he left they conferred together. Maximum security prisoners have very few rights and freedoms and so, within the constraints of their circumstances, they requested two things from the prison authorities: that they be able to start a vegetable garden to grow food for Thabang and that they be given access to their private clothes so that they could fashion them into some new clothes for him.

Thabang, who was allowed to visit his new fathers once a month, began to thrive on all the attention and love he received. Other children, who had also lost their parents to AIDS, were soon put forward by social workers in the district. The Group of Hope eventually had nearly 30 children under its wing, and children’s birthday parties became a regular feature of the monthly visits. The Group members also advanced their sewing skills and, with the help of several donated sewing machines and overlockers, made a range of clothing for their children. This included smart tracksuits embroidered with the Group of Hope emblem as well as clothes and

quilts for other organisations looking after orphaned or disabled children.

While none of these men would be considered ideal role models as fathers, nor a maximum security prison an ideal place for children to visit, hope has indeed turned the situation around. The men all agreed that they wouldn't want their children to make the same choices and mistakes they made, and the best work they could therefore do was to help others, especially children, and prevent them from following suit. As one member said, "*As a father, it's an honour to take a child and teach them something.....something that I would like to teach my own children*". Another member added, "

*I never used to think about my future because it meant nothing to me. Now I worry about it every day as I have so many responsibilities to these children.*"

The retired social worker who brought the children for their monthly visits said, "*Every time they come here you can see it in their faces that they can't wait for the gate to open. To me it looks like they get a lot of love here.*"

" In the words of one prisoner who was involved in several gang shootings and also accidentally killed a young child in a drive-by shooting, "

*I didn't get a chance to tell the people in court that I was sorry for what I did. And that's why I've gotten into the Group - because of the life I took from that kid. I'm now just trying to give it back to kids that don't have moms and dads.*"

Mr Pansegrouw was keen to address concerns people may have about prisoners working with children. "*With rehabilitation and new ideas, there is always controversy, but safety and security are never neglected. The members demonstrated their commitment to the ideals and vision of the Group of Hope for many months before adopting the children.*" And this commitment continues to grow. After watching a TV programme on a young girl with leukaemia who needed a bone marrow transplant, the Group members all decided to register as bone marrow donors so that they might also be able to help such children. One member said, "*If I'm chosen one day to save a child's life by donating my bone marrow to them, that will be the highlight of my life.*"

The establishment and work of the Group has also been life changing for Mr Pansegrouw. "Years ago when I was still at school, I told my mother that I wanted to do something with my life. And, when this project crossed my path, I knew deep inside myself that I had arrived and was where I was meant to be. I know my life will never be the same again."

The Group had big plans. They helped to establish nine similar Groups of Hope in other prisons around the Western Cape before the project at Brandvlei Maximum was suddenly terminated by the Department of Correctional Services in 2009. Fortunately several of the members who were moved to Worcester Medium have managed to get the project going again. The Group is currently working with [Mothers for All](#), an organisation which provides training in income generation skills to the caregivers of AIDS orphans in Botswana and South Africa. Mothers for All is training the Group to make recycled paper bead jewellery which is being sold to raise funds for the orphans being supported by the Group.

The Group of Hope has won several awards for its work, including one from the World Bank for 'The Country Innovation Day HIV/AIDS: Turning Ideas Into Action' and a Centre for Public Service Innovations Award from the South African Government.

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