

Bright young helping hands (*un-subbed*)
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It's hard to see your hand in front of your face inside the Motorcycle Spares Centre in the middle of Johannesburg town. Candles stuck in old amstel bottles provide meager illumination and it takes some time for your eyes to adjust. This darkness is not due to loadshedding in practice, it's like this every night.

The abandoned building provides shelter to approximately 30 people who would otherwise be at the mercy of the city streets.

Gregory Skinner, a fourth year medical student examines a baby who's been coughing up blood. His mother, Mamelo, one of the inhabitants, holds a crying Prince up on a rough wooden table while Skinner tries to check what's causing the two-month-old's symptoms.

Skinner uses a torch to aid him and scribbles down an official looking note for Mamelo to take to the clinic. Prince is fascinated by the light play of the torch and is soon pacified. Skinner is one of the medical students who venture out every Wednesday evening as part of the Paballo Ya Batho project. These students offer basic first aid, and spend their time examining wounds, changing dressings and administering basic medication. They also write referral letters.

"We write these notes for clinics or hospitals for the homeless we examine. It legitimises them, else so many of them feel they're too dirty to go and seek medical attention," Skinner said.

Skinner, a student at Wits Medical School has come to the outreach almost every Wednesday, for the past four years. He is a member of the campus society Disciples Of Christ (DOCS) and this is how he got involved initially. "I come mainly to help people. I feel I've been given knowledge and I must use it. I feel good when I know I've been useful," he said.

David Quan Chong, a graphic designer by profession is one of the non medical volunteers who also donate their time on a weekday night to hand out soup, bread and a friendly ear to the city's homeless. "It's more than handing out soup and bread. We start up conversations with them, we get to know them," he said.

Along with around thirty other volunteers – the numbers vary from week to week – Chong hands out two slices of bread and a cup of soup each to the hundreds of people who line up for the hot meal on Nugget street, Plein Street and other designated areas in Newtown and close to the Johannesburg Public Library.

"This is good soup I've been told" Chong said. It's made by other homeless people and consists of soya mince and green peas. Two hundred loaves of bread are used up every Wednesday night.

Some of the volunteers also dig in if there's soup and bread left-over.

"It's hard to get people to come through as volunteers, but once they've come once, they return," Chong said.

Ndai Mncedesi is the director or Paballo Ya Batho. He is assisted by Sam Mugambe, the assistant project director.

Mugambe started with Paballo Ya Batho in 2002 as a volunteer and joined the organisation full time in 2004.

“The first time I came for this, it was just to see what was happening. I then realised that these people are exactly like us. They are friendly and willing to uplift themselves. I know many of them by their names and visit them,” he said.

“The problem is you feel you’re not doing enough,” Mugambe said.

The organisation aims to provide opportunities for the homeless. “They are dedicated despite their issues of being on the street – these people really have nothing. Some of them are from Natal, Eastern Cape, Nelspruit, Lesotho. Some have piece jobs and other temporary work,” he said.

They also work to unite people with their families. “We’ve even united people from as far away as Zambia and Zimbabwe,” Mugambe said.

Paballo helps the homeless get identity documents as well as sponsoring funerals and arranging transport money.

“Our doors are open to everyone,” he said.

Tuesday nights at the Methodist church are support group nights.

“It’s an opportunity for them to talk about their problems, network and get valuable information.”

“We also keep documents for safekeeping and provide photocopying and faxing services. We want to put an emphasis on skills development. We had Jawitz properties sponsor beadwork courses,” said Mugambe.

The volunteers are not only made up of university students and young professionals. Highschoolers with no qualms about giving off their time to spend an evening in the inner city were also in attendance.

Potso Mmako is a 14 year old student at Roosevelt High. She’s been coming every Wednesday since last September, except during exams.

“I’ve learnt to appreciate the things I have in life by coming here,” she says.

Kgotso Mkotho is in his final year at school and has been coming for the past three years. He got involved through his church. “It feels good to be here. I know that God wants me to do this,” he said.