



## Connecting with Small Communities



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December 17, 2014

Abstract: The 2014 WPI team working at the Sizakuyenza Safe House aimed to improve facilities at the shelter to provide a more conducive environment for recovery and therapy, while empowering the staff and residents by involving them in accomplishing projects throughout the facility. Establishing a strong working relationship with the Safe House community was crucial, and the planning of improvements also needed to integrate the input of staff and residents. Moreover, working in a safe house required sensitivity to volatile and delicate situations. This document can be used by project teams aiming to connect with a small community. It outlines some of the methods and tools used by our team to build not only strong working relationships, but also close personal connections.

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Project Website: For much more on the project from which this report derives, please see <http://wp.wpi.edu/capetown/projects/p2014/sizakuyenza/>

CTPC Publication Date: December, 2014

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Community Resources publications are designed to assist residents, community-based and non-profit organizations, local government, students, educators and others working toward sustainable community development in disadvantaged communities in South Africa and elsewhere.

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# Connecting with Small Communities: Bonding with Staff and Residents at the Sizakuyenza Safe House

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## Preliminary Research and Preparation

Our team spent a significant amount of time during the seven week preparation and research phase prior to the our team's arrival in South Africa learning as much as we could about working within a safe house context. It was important for us to be intentional in our approach to interaction and be cautious about respecting the boundaries and emotions of the residents. Researching the effects domestic violence shelters can have on the women and children who live there gave us plenty of insight on expectations and considerations. We researched ethics of working with women who are victims of domestic violence, and compiled the following list of ethical considerations for our interaction, adapted from guidelines created by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women<sup>1</sup>:

- Discussions must be held in an environment in which all individuals are comfortable.
- All women must be aware why the team was present.
- All women must give verbal consent to be photographed and for what the team and they discussed to be published on the web.
- The women must be aware that they have no obligation to work with us or interact with us.
- No names will be included in any documents, only initials, so as to protect the identity of the women and children staying at the safe house.
- The team should always be sensitive to what the women have gone through and act respectfully at all times.
- There should never be any direct questions about the women's experiences with abuse.

Sizakuyenza Safe House is home to children as well as women, and there are always ethical concerns when dealing with minors. In order to respect their rights and make them feel more at ease our team referenced the 'Code of Ethics for People Working with Children and Young People' and gained the following guidelines<sup>2</sup>:

- Value and respect each child or young person as an individual in his/her own right, in his/her role as a member of his/her family, and in his/her role as a member of the community s/he lives in;

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<sup>1</sup> Women, U. (2012). Ethical Considerations. 2014, from <http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/174-ethical-considerations.html>

<sup>2</sup> Schmit, C. (1998). A Code of Ethics for People Working with Children and Young People. *FICE Bulletin*, 14.

- Respect the relationship of the child or young person to his/her parents, his/her siblings, other members of his/her family and other significant persons, taking account of his/her natural ties and interdependent rights and responsibilities;
- Facilitate the optimal growth and development of each individual child or young person to achieve his or her potential in all aspects of functioning;
- Help each child or young person for whom he or she bears responsibility by preventing problems where possible, by offering protection where necessary, and by providing care and rehabilitation to counteract or resolve the problems faced;
- Use information appropriately, respecting the privacy of children and young people, maintaining confidentiality where necessary, respecting the right of children and young people to be informed of matters concerning themselves, and avoiding the misuse of personal information;
- Oppose at all times any form of discrimination, oppression or exploitation of children and young people, and preserve their rights;
- Maintain personal and professional integrity, develop skills and knowledge in order to work with competence, work co-operatively with colleagues, monitor the quality of services, and contribute to the development of the service and of policy and thinking in the field of childcare.

## Initial Connections with the Community

Arriving at Sizakuyenza for the first time, we were excited to meet and begin working with our community. However, before being introduced to the safe house residents, we had to gain a better understanding of the mechanics of the organization. We began by taking a tour of the many facets of Sizakuyenza, and conducting informal interviews with staff about their goals and needs for our project.

After making these initial connections, we met the Safe House residents for the first time. We wanted to be as open and friendly as possible, but also wanted to keep in mind that we were outsiders coming into a sensitive space. Fortunately, the residents were very warm and welcoming to us, preparing a meal for all of us to share together. Our conversation opened with discussions about food in our respective cultures, a great segue into cultural differences and similarities. Many of the women imagined the United States as a place without problems—they were surprised to find out that we experienced many of the same struggles that they did.

The housemother began teaching us phrases in Xhosa, the language most commonly spoken by safe house residents. We fell into a daily routine of practicing common phrases with the housemother and the women. Especially at the beginning of the project, this was a good way to connect with our community.

Our fumbling to pronounce Xhosa words provided plenty of laughter, and gave the community an opportunity to teach us something. We wanted to be sure to convey the



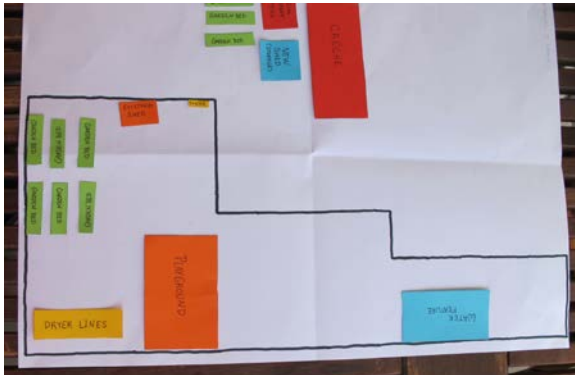
Having lunch with the women.

idea that we were not coming to fix everything for them, and that we did not have all of the answers. Giving them the opportunity to be the “teachers” created a relationship of equality. As the projects progressed, our team worked to maintain and cultivate our personal relationships with the women. We brought apple pie and cupcakes to celebrate birthdays and shared photos of friends and family from home to share our stories.

## Interactive Model for Design

Collaboration and input from the community was important as we developed priorities for the things to accomplish during our limited time, and particularly as we created a layout for the new features of the yard. We walked through the house and yard with our liaison, the housemother, and the residents, discussing various needs and a “wish list” of things they would like to see improved or accomplished while we were there.

For the yard layout, we decided to create an interactive model that the staff and residents could use to collaborate on a design. We mapped out the space available in the yard, and cut out to-scale colored pieces of paper representing various features of the yard. We set up the pieces in the original layout and gave the model to the women, asking them to show us how they would like the yard to look. We also gave them extra paper, which they used to add new features that we had not considered, such as a fence to separate the space designated for women and children.



Our interactive model displaying the original layout of the yard when we arrived.

The model provided a fluid, flexible way for the community to visualize the space, and fostered creativity with the opportunity to arrange pieces as desired and to create new features. We found that it was a very successful way to engage the staff and residents in the design process, and could easily be replicated for the layout design of another space, such as a crèche or other facility.

## Keeping the Community Motivated and Involved

In our first conversation with our project liaison, he emphasized the fact that we should be working with, not working for, the residents of the safe house. We wanted to keep them involved in the additions and renovations that we made, to give them a sense of ownership for the house and its maintenance and care. With the development of each project that the team accomplished, we continuously sought out input and feedback. Some of this happened through working with the residents as they went through their day-to-day life in order to see what could be important for them. We came up with ideas for improving the children's playground by watching them play in the yard and helping them play on the monkey bars and swing. For example, we saw that the children loved to climb, and often fought over whose turn it was to go on the swing. This, combined with insights from our preliminary research, led us to add a new climbing structure and more swings to the existing play structure. The garden was also greatly influenced by the input of our community. The staff chose the size and location of the new garden beds, looking for a more manageably sized space, away from the children's playground area, opening up space for a future on-site crèche. We asked the residents to choose the vegetables, herbs, and flowers they wanted to plant, so that they could best enjoy the benefits of maintaining the garden.

We also encouraged the residents to make several of the major decisions for improvements, such as choosing colors for each room when we repainted the interior of the house. This gave them a sense of autonomy and ownership for each task, and watching their ideas and input come to fruition motivated them to continue working hard. It was important for us to step back and for them to have the chance to complete tasks without our assistance, to communicate our confidence in



Mama Pilisani, the housemother, smiles as she watches a slideshow of our weekly progress.



their capabilities. The women responded to this very well, often completing entire tasks far more quickly than we had anticipated. We put together slideshows with pictures of us working together and our accomplishments, to recognize and celebrate their hard work.

## Conclusion

Our team was fortunate to be welcomed into our small community, but this process also took intention and planning. Involvement of the residents and staff in our work was a very important aspect of our project goals, so we had to strategize methods to build a trusting bond fostering strong working and interpersonal relationships. Many of the approaches that we had planned during our preparation were never used and the process took as much flexibility as it did planning. We were thrilled, however, with the outcome of the connecting process. Not only did we connect with the community; we feel that we became part of a family.