

Empowerment through Improving Facilities at the Sizakuyenza Safe House



Our project aimed to promote the rebirth of hope through the implementation of physical improvements to the Sizakuyenza Safe House, a shelter for women and children who have survived domestic abuse. We were able to realize our goal through extensive cooperation and input from those living and working in the shelter. A blossoming relationship with the Safe House residents and staff allowed us to implement a variety of upgrades and additions, including developing a children's playground, renovating a therapeutic fountain, designing and installing an adjustable set of dryer lines, and customizing a garden. The staff and residents were an integral part of each task, giving them a feeling of achievement with each addition and upgrade. This involvement introduced an atmosphere of motivation, a sense of ownership, and a culture of hope and empowerment to every woman and child.

This is an executive summary of a WPI Cape Town Project Centre project that is fully reported at <http://wp.wpi.edu/capetown/projects/p2014/sizakuyenza/>

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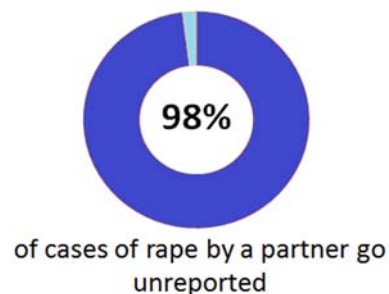
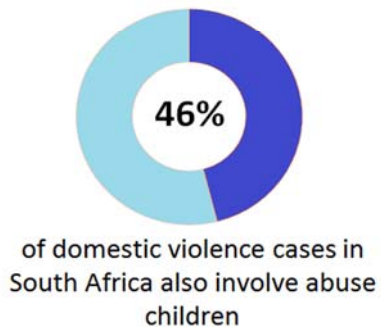


Figure 1: Statistics for prevalence of domestic violence in South Africa.

OPPORTUNITY STATEMENT

South Africa has one of the highest national rates for domestic violence in the world. One out of every six women in the country is assaulted by her partner (Preller, 2014), while an estimated 40% of South African men have hit their companion (SACAP, 2013). One of the most common forms of domestic abuse is sexual assault. Despite its prevalence, an estimated 98% of cases of rape by a partner go unreported to police. Domestic abuse affects more than just the women. About 46% of reported cases include children as victims of physical or sexual violence (Preller, 2014).

Shelters for abused women and children are extremely important community assets because of the prevalence of domestic violence in Cape Town settlements. However, safe houses often work with limited staffing and budgets. Immediate needs, such as food, clothing, staff compensation, and legal or medical assistance are the first to be considered. Facing these costs, shelters do not have the time or funds to initiate construction or maintenance projects that could beautify these spaces and assist in the residents' recovery. Our team had the opportunity to supplement current Safe House resources and manage projects which have been postponed due to the focus on immediate needs.

BACKGROUND: SAFE HOUSE SERVICES AND NEEDS

Safe houses provide battered women and children security and therapy until they can find a place to live and stabilize their fu-

ture. Although the goal of a safe house is to help heal and empower domestic violence survivors, it can sometimes be a stressful environment with each resident going through her own personal process of recovery. It is important that a safe house be a place for survivors to feel secure, comfortable, and connected.

The features and conditions of a safe house facility are very important. A space that is well maintained and comfortable, containing features conducive to their needs, will provide residents with the opportunity to recover more effectively than a space not meeting these requirements. Each safe house has specific needs based on location and context, but there are several key attributes that support effective recovery.

One of these needs is a space for early childhood development. The children living at safe houses are often victims of abuse, and their recovery and development is just as important as that of the women. An important resource for early childhood development is the playground, which attracts children of all ages. A WPI project team working on the redevelopment of Maitland Garden Village Park in 2013 conducted research to determine the best way to integrate early childhood development into the construction of a play park. The group established entryways for the children to explore the entire park by adding archways or stepping stones between elements to maximize the available space. They found that challenging obstacles could give children a strong affirmation and sense of accomplishment, allowing them to gain a healthy level of confidence (Goddard, Collins, Bahtiaran, & Connors, 2013). In playgrounds intended for use by several different age groups, areas should be tailored toward specific

developmental stages to provide appropriate stimulation and encourage decision-making, social interaction, and critical thinking (Low, 2012).

One common frustration a safe house resident has is the feeling of being trapped (Lygum, 2012). An outdoor space that can be used for both recreation and relaxation can alleviate the sense of confinement, and is often a favorite place for residents. Victims of domestic violence, having moved into a safe house, can often find close contact with a multitude of new people to be stressful. Thus, an area where they can get away can also be useful. An outdoor location is generally ideal as it creates an escape from the closed in and cramped feeling that can come with living with unfamiliar people (Lygum, 2012). Safe houses with outdoor environments have a multitude of potential health benefits, including stress coping, improved attention, self-confidence, strengthened feelings of self, and improved social competence (Lygum, 2012).

Both the playground and outdoor space are instrumental in a safe house for residents' recovery. However, both take an investment of time and effort to create and maintain. With staffing limitations, it can be difficult for a safe house to meet all of these needs. Sizakuyenza, our host and partner organization, created a safe house that shelters 5-6 women and 12 children at any one time, for 4-6 months, until they are ready to integrate back into society. The shelter needed assistance with facilities improvements, including painting, garden customization, playground improvement, and other renovations and maintenance.

METHODOLOGY/PROCESS

The goal of this project was to improve facilities at the Sizakuyenza Safe House to provide a more conducive environment to therapy and recovery while empowering the staff and residents by involving them in accomplishing projects throughout the facility. Our team pursued this goal through the following objectives:

- Connect with the residents and staff through interaction and social activities
- Gather and analyze input to identify and prioritize areas of the Safe House that need improvement
- Design a collaborative plan of action that best addresses Safe House needs with the help of residents and staff
- Implement plans with the involvement and assistance of residents and staff

CONNECTING WITH RESIDENTS AND STAFF

In order to accomplish our goal of empowerment through involvement, our team established strong working relationships with the residents and staff. We began by taking a tour of the entire Sizakuyenza organization, and meeting several staff members who were crucial to our progress. We conducted informal interviews to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the organization, and the priorities the staff had regarding the facility improvements. Once our team had established relationships with the staff, we were introduced to the Safe House residents. We approached this delicately, recognizing that we were outsiders coming into a vulnerable space. However, we were pleasantly surprised by how warmly we were received into their small community. We shared meals with them, dis-

cussing our respective cultures and backgrounds, as well as showed pictures of family and friends from home. The housemother, Mama Pilisani, began teaching us common phrases in their native language, Xhosa, which we practiced with the women and children, providing several opportunities for laughter. Residents gave us their own tour of the Safe House, giving us more personal insight into their space and needs. Our team formed a trusting friendship with the women, which provided openness and confidence as we began to work together.

GATHERING AND ANALYZING INPUT

In order to establish which outcomes were most important and how each should be executed, the team sought input from a multitude of people. We walked through the yard several times with Mama Pilisani and our liaison, Gershwin Kohler, to identify

opportunities for repair and improvement. We began the landscape redesign process by creating an interactive model: a scaled map of the yard with movable pieces representing each existing and desired feature. We left the model and extra paper with the women overnight to promote opportunities for more collaborative decision-making. The residents and staff provided us with new ideas by cutting out new shapes to add to the model, which gave us a great new perspective. We gathered daily input and feedback for each element of the project as it developed. For example, the staff decided the location and size of the new garden, while the residents chose the vegetables, herbs and flowers to be planted.

DESIGNING A PLAN OF ACTION

Based on the input of the women through the interactive model, we came up with a

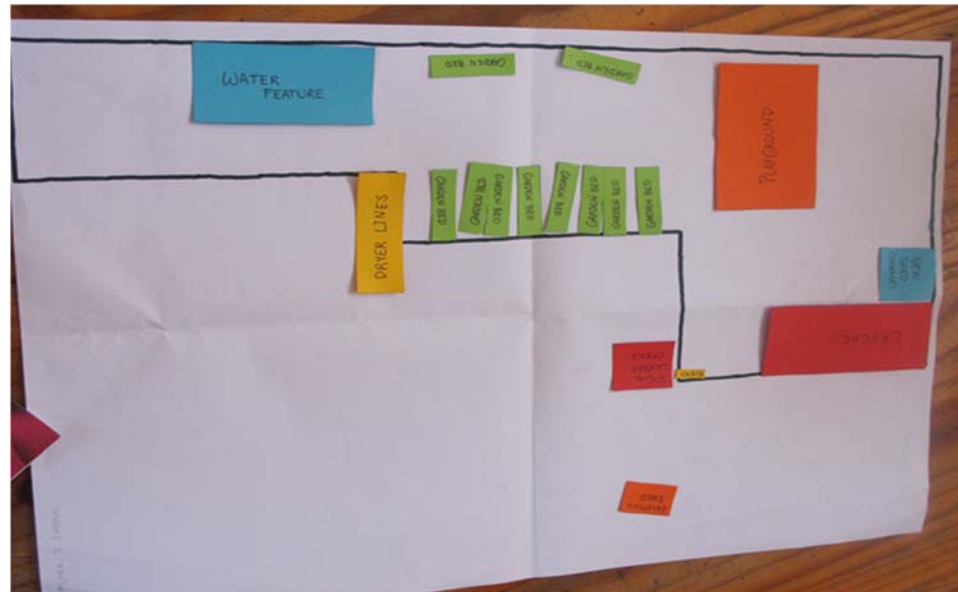


Figure 3: The women brainstorm ideas for yard layout using our interactive model.



Figure 4: Even on daunting tasks, such as sawing, the women were eager to participate.

design for the yard and a list of prioritized jobs to accomplish. Each element of the project was researched extensively to identify designs that fit the residents' needs. The team drafted a materials list and ordered any large materials that could not be procured at the local hardware store. For each large order, the team considered several options, and provided Sizakuyenza's financial manager with the recommended models and prices. Our team then drafted an opportunity outline, in which we generated step-by-step procedures to accomplish each project. These procedures evolved as we obtained input and materials.

IMPLEMENTING PLANS WITH THE HELP OF STAFF AND RESIDENTS

Our team worked alongside the residents and staff on each project, learning together many new skills such as painting, sawing, and digging. With each new skill, the team approached the situation with enthusiasm and patience. The women came eager to learn, as they could see our team bringing their ideas to life. Tangible change, such as

painting the Safe House interior, kept the residents motivated. The team celebrated progress and showed appreciation for communal hard work by sharing weekly slideshows of everyone working together to accomplish goals.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO BUILD A COMMUNITY

The connection we were able to build with the women was one of the most significant accomplishments made within the project. Trauma as serious as the women in the Safe House have experienced can make it extremely difficult to form trusting relationships. To safe house residents, outsiders can cause stress, especially when cultural barriers are also present. Fortunately, the women and children at Sizakuyenza were almost immediately welcoming toward us. Both planned and unplanned activities were well received, allowing us to create an emotional bond with the women and children, and collaborate with ease. Our relationship, built upon sharing, trust and common goals, grew throughout the duration of the project. It was a major factor in our ability to achieve many complex tasks in such a short time period.

DEVELOPING A SYSTEM FOR COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

Before making major changes in the Safe House yard, we pursued crucial input from the staff and residents. Our interactive model was a novel process which yielded tailored outcomes. It helped us overcome the language barrier while simultaneously en-

gaging the women's critical thinking and creativity. Getting the women involved in the planning process allowed us to customize the project outcomes directly to their needs. Seeing their plans become realities created a sense of ownership for the women, which will be beneficial to the long-term upkeep of the facilities.

RENEWING THE FOUNTAIN TO CREATE A RELAXING SPACE

A few years prior to our team's arrival, the Safe House had a functional water feature that served as a relaxing space for the recovering women. However, the children punctured the tarp basin, causing the water to drain and the pump motor to fail. We completely reconstructed the feature by installing a durable fiberglass basin and high-quality submersible water pump. The renewed feature is much more damage-resistant and has the ability to last for years with minimal maintenance. Now completed, the fountain's soft trickling water is both audibly and visually relaxing. By coupling some of the women's favorite flowers with a few ground-covering plants, we were able



Figure 5: Safe House staff enjoying the tranquility of the new fountain and flower garden.



Figure 6: Collaboration was essential as we worked together to paint the interior of the Safe House.

to create a serene, fresh, and peaceful perimeter to the fountain's edge. By appealing to the women's eyes, ears, and nose, the water feature and the surrounding area has become a sanctuary that can provide multiple aspects of therapy to each resident.

A FRESH COAT OF HOPE: PAINTING THE SAFE HOUSE

Repainting the interior of the Safe House was one of the most time consuming, but rewarding, tasks. We allowed the women to collectively choose the color of each room. The choices they made led to a bright, multi-colored interior. Painting alongside the women was an effective way of invoking

visible change and inspiring them to take initiative and work on their own. On multiple occasions, the women painted entire rooms on their own, saying that they

“loved the new colors...now [the Safe House] looks like hope.”

As the first major upgrading activity, this task gave us an opportunity to connect with the women on a working level, and allowed them to realize their ability to overcome their trauma and accomplish great things. Upon completion, the finished paint created a fun and welcoming environment in the Safe House.

DESIGNATING YARD SPACES FOR A VARIETY OF NEEDS

A fence dividing the women and children's sections of the yard was a feature we had not initially considered. The interactive design process allowed the women to bring the idea to our attention, and we were able to implement a fence that met all of their criteria. We produced an extremely sturdy structure that also allowed easy sight lines for the women to watch their children on the other side. The fence designates separate areas for the women and children, allowing them to feel that they have their own spaces. It also protects the delicate features, such as the garden and fountain, from the children while they play.

NURTURING GROWTH: PRODUCING A FUNCTIONAL GARDEN

Relocating the garden was essential in restoring the residents' interest in gardening. The previous garden was a large, unmanageable space, located next to the playground. To prevent children from playing in the garden and to facilitate the future plans for a crèche, a South African childcare facility,



Figure 7: The residents work along side us to prepare the soil for future growth.

ty, we relocated the garden to the women's side of the yard and downsized its total area. We created incentive for the women to value the garden by choosing specific plants based on the vegetables and herbs the women use most. Immense help from all of the women led to establishing a new area of five garden beds, protected from the children by the fence, that they were all interested in maintaining. The skillset they can gain from gardening may carry over in their lives after leaving the Safe House, as a few women have indicated interest in planting their own gardens when they graduate.

ADVANCING CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The upgrade of the playground and designs for a crèche were tangible upgrades specifically aimed at assisting the children of the Safe House. Initially, the children did not have a designated area for recreation or learning conducive to their recovery and safety in the yard. The playground upgrades included repairing the existing structure and constructing a tire ladder, two balance beams and five stepping poles. We observed the children play in order to determine their specific needs and gauge the range of physical capabilities. Each element of the playground is fitted to the various levels of development of the children the Safe House regularly accommodates. The younger children can navigate through the simple obstacles, and the older ones are prompted to make decisions to challenge themselves on the larger structures. The repaired and new playground elements can help keep the children safely engaged while their mothers are busy, providing for a great deal of personal growth.



Figure 8: The finished play area provides plenty of opportunity for recreation and learning.

Having a learning space within the Safe House yard can combat the danger of sending the children to crèche outside of the safety of Sizakuyenza, where they run the risk of being kidnapped by abusers on the commute. Sizakuyenza has had the idea of building an on-site crèche for several years, but none of the staff has been able to initiate the design process. The designs we created for the crèche are a starting place where Sizakuyenza can advance the process of implementing this goal. Beginning the crèche planning and design process eroded the sense of stagnation surrounding the idea of establishing an onsite crèche. Gershwin, our liaison, was inspired by our designs to realize the dream of building a

crèche may be possible earlier than expected. He sent preliminary plans to Sizakuyenza's governing organization, CESVI (an Italian-based NGO), and began considering options for the installment of a permanent crèche in the Safe House yard.

AN ADJUSTABLE SOLUTION: ALLEVIATING CROWDED LAUNDRY LINES

One of the most exciting accomplishments for the team was the creation of innovative dryer lines. The women expressed their need for more sturdy drying lines, as several of the existing lines had been bent or broken. It was evident that the full length of the remaining lines were not utilized, as the ends were too high to reach. The women

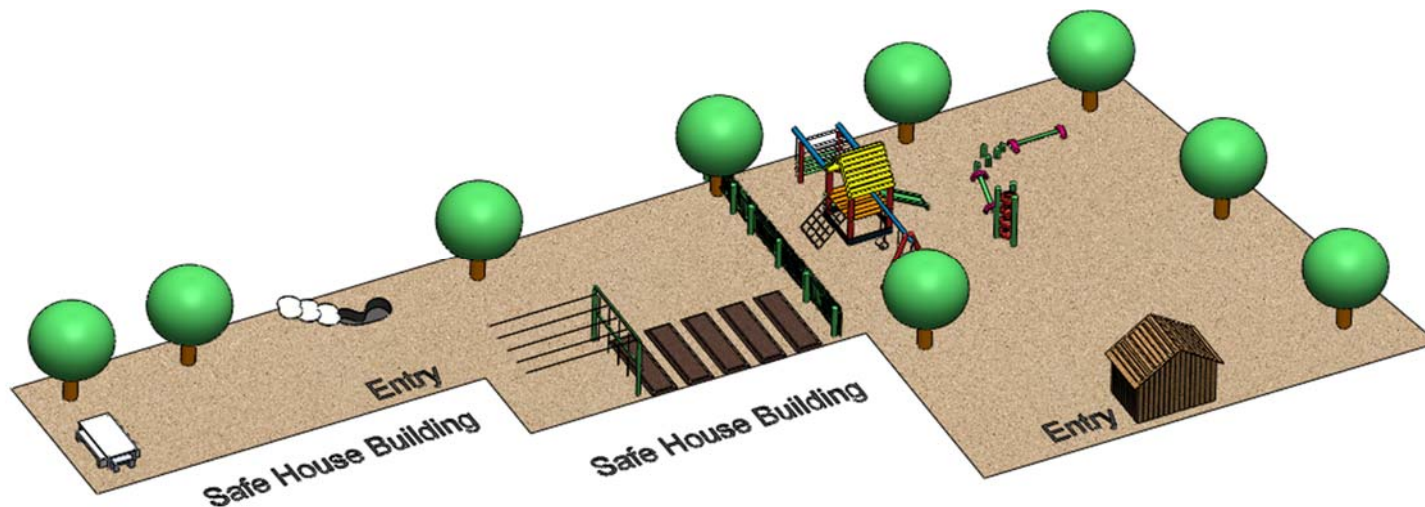


Figure 9: CAD design of our final yard layout.

also expressed that the children should not be able to damage lines. All of these concerns lead us to a unique, yet simple design. The new lines are adjustable, with the line being fixed securely to one post, and looped around a hook on the other. Each of the five new lines can be untied from the hooks and slacked. When pulled taut, they are far out of reach of children. When lines are slacked, clothing can be secured to the entirety of the line, as it is all within reach.



Figure 10: A Safe House resident uses the new dryer lines.

The structure takes weather exposure into consideration, being partially covered by an awning for when it rains, and partially exposed to the sun. The new design also aesthetically fits into the landscape of the yard.

OUR BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT: CONNECTING, INSPIRING, EMPOWERING

The most important accomplishment of the project was the change experienced throughout the Safe House environment and the Sizakuyenza organization as a whole, as we tried to inspire and positively impact each person we came in contact with. By including the residents and staff in our planning and asking them to assist us in upgrading the facilities at the Safe House, we observed the women take on a more positive, optimistic view in the realization that each person can make an impact. There were on-going projects to look forward to throughout the process, and by working in integrated teams of both residents and students, we were able to build

strong relationships. We hope they will initiate and complete their own projects in the future. The women were able to carry themselves with pride for all they had accomplished. The atmosphere in Sizakuyenza was lighter, happier, and far more productive than it was when we came in on the first day. As Mama Pilisani told us one day,

“It’s like you have given us wings, and now we can fly.”

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

CRÈCHE AND SHED DESIGNS:

The HIV and TB testing facet of Sizakuyenza is looking to install a medical shed as an addition to the crèche because they are currently using a Safe House bedroom as storage. The site for a crèche and medical

storage shed has been identified and we have prepared a portfolio for future project advancement, including a set of preliminary CAD designs. The portfolio includes a multitude of resources a project team will need if they chose to pursue the construction and registration of a crèche that meets all applicable regulations as well as reasonable pricing options for the shed.

FACILITIES CARE POSTERS

Before leaving, we left three posters in the Safe House explaining the required preventative maintenance for each new feature of the yard. This will be a valuable resource for ensuring the longevity of the features in the Safe House yard as new residents arrive.

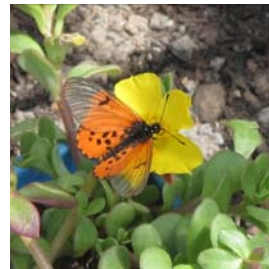
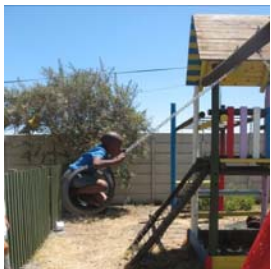
CONCLUSION

We successfully upgraded and installed numerous features, both around the yard and inside the house. While completing these tasks, we were able to inspire and empower the women to work alongside us and even take on projects of their own, such as painting the play structure before we had arrived one morning. Witnessing the extent to which the women transitioned into a self-sufficient group of co-workers was an incredible, unexpected feat. Even more unanticipated was the effect that the Sizakuyenza family had on us. We have gained invaluable understanding, strength, and insight from this project and have truly grown together. While we know our work has directly affected the current Safe House residents, we are optimistic we helped promote a culture of hope and empowerment for every woman and child who passes through the Safe House.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our team would like to thank all those who helped us on our project and worked alongside us through our whole process. We are honored to have been able to spend the time getting to know you.

- Nomfundo “Mama” Pilisani – Sizakuyenza Safe House Housemother
- Gloria Mayiji – Sizakuyenza Safe House Housemother
- Gershwin Kholer – Financial Director of Sizakuyenza and Project Liaison
- Nontembiso Mevama – Manager of Sizakuyenza
- The Women and Children of the Sizakuyenza Safe House – Our Coworkers and Family
- Scott Jiusto and Stephen McCauley – Project Advisors
- Golden Menziwa – Sizakuyenza Caretaker



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