



Unbarring the heart

Three Joburg women are transforming the lives of female maximum security prison inmates by teaching them to express their feelings

GOOD SAMARITANS: From left, Debbie Jones, Jean Geerthsen and Marie Benson
Picture: BONILLE BAM

FUTHI NTSHINGILA

S PENDING time in a maximum security prison is not everyone's cup of tea, but three well-off Gauteng women love being behind bars.

The women have made a heart-warming connection with inmates at the Joburg Maximum Security Prison For Women in Diephof, Soweto.

A year ago Jean Geerthsen, Marie Benson and Debbie Jones came together and developed a course aimed at helping women prisoners deal with their emotions and their pasts.

Every Thursday the three women give up their freedom to sit and talk to prisoners.

They try to get them to open up and trust strangers with the stories of their lives.

"Initially they were very reluctant to talk but as the trust developed their stories became real," said Geerthsen.

"Prison was not my comfort zone but now there's nothing that could keep me from going there. I learn from them more than they would ever learn from me. They are survivors," she added.

In the time the three women have been there, they have witnessed tough prisoners turn into kind and caring

people and have watched them begin to take pride in themselves.

METRO HEROES!

"As they get self-esteem they visibly change and some soften," said Jones.

The course, entitled Heartwork Personal Growth, is made up of 12 stages in which the inmates learn to express their feelings through the use of evocative music pieces and role-play.

"The course has changed my life. I am able to forgive people. I have confessed my crime in front of people. It's also helped me understand my feelings," said Lerato Ramose, who is serving time for house-breaking.

She had come so far, thanks to the course, and wanted to reconcile with the victims of her crime and seek their forgiveness.

The course also encourages the inmates to do something creative to give them a sense of achievement — such as making bright potpourri boxes.

For some women, it is the first time they have made anything.

The course ends with a graduation ceremony where the inmates invite their families, talk about their stories and receive certificates.

Music, which is central to the lives of most women in prison, dominates the ceremony.

"This [stage 12] is where we come out with a lot of tears. You haven't heard music until you've heard them sing. It's like they are clinging to life when they sing. There is passion and depth to it," said Jones.

At the last graduation in April, the inmates surprised the Heartwork team with a rendition of Westlife's affirming song, *No matter what they call us*.

None of the course developers are qualified psychologists, just members of a church group who came together out of concern for the plight of female inmates.

Geerthsen is a pastor who deals with the youth at a church in Pretoria, Benson runs her own furniture repair business and Jones is a housewife.

However, they do have counselling experience and worked with psychologists in the drawing up of the course. And it is not only the prisoners who the course has changed but also the Heartwork team.

Jones says that the prison programme has made the three women realise that: "We are not just northern suburbs women but we have had similar experiences to them. We are mothers with children, just like them."