

Expanding Magnet Theatre

When Anthony was in secondary school in Nairobi, he started using drugs with his friends and then started stealing. His parents were so frustrated that they kicked him out of their home. When he came back they called the police and had him arrested. He was then sentenced to three years Shikusa Juvenile Centre in Western Kenya.

Shikusa Juvenile Centre is one of only two youth correctional facilities in all of Kenya. Over 400 boys, aged 15-18, are imprisoned there under harsh conditions. Boys sleep on the cement floor and share a limited number of blankets in an overcrowded room that holds four times the intended capacity. For many of the boys at Shikusa, their uniforms are tattered, not much more than rags. Even for those who have newer-looking uniforms, their short sleeves and short pants do not provide much protection, especially in the cooler months, when broken windows let in the night air, and cold showers are mandatory.



Photo: PATH, C. Y. Gopinath

Since Anthony came to Shikusa, he has written two letters to his parents and is still waiting for a reply. Under these conditions it would not be surprising if Anthony was hardened and antisocial; but that is not the impression onlookers get when they see him perform for his fellow inmates after a Magnet Theatre session.

In October 2005, Jijazie Hybrid Thespians (a PATH-supported theatre troupe) began to perform at Shikusa. Martin, the troupe leader, realized that there was an entire population of young people who were not being reached by Magnet Theatre. He approached the Officer-in-Charge, Billy Koshal, at church one Sunday and suggested his troupe come and perform. After seeing how actively the inmates performed and how the performance ignited conversations among inmates, wardens and troupe members, Officer Koshal asked them to come back once a month, which they have been doing ever since. Nelson, a counselor at Shikusa, said that a group of counselors who had recently come to talk with the boys wasted several days – they could not get the boys to open up the way Jijazie does after just an hour or two of Magnet Theatre.

Magnet Theatre is community theatre that typically takes place in outdoor, public spaces. The performances explore community issues and encourage discussion and problem-solving with community members. The actors perform a drama that presents a dilemma based on community problems. The audience participates by offering suggestions to the characters as well as acting out solutions to the dilemma. Magnet Theatre encourages dialogue and allows the audience to discuss and test solutions to problems, in order to bring about individual and community-wide change. The Theatre Session is followed by a post-performance discussion where audience members can ask troupe members more personal, in-depth questions.

After a typical Magnet Theatre session, young people are encouraged to perform a song or skit. This is the time when Anthony had the opportunity to show off his talent. He and a friend performed a song that had the boys in the audience smiling, singing and tapping along then erupting into applause – sharing in his happiness. Anthony talked about how he had always wanted to be in the drama club in school and how much he enjoys singing. Magnet Theatre has given him the opportunity to explore these interests as well as help him realize that he does not need drugs.

In an institution that is severely under-supported, Magnet Theatre provides young people an opportunity to interact in a meaningful way without feeling condemned or ashamed.

PATH improves the health of people around the world by advancing technologies, strengthening systems, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

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