

# IN AN IVORY COAST PRISON: FORGING FREEDOM TOGETHER

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Photo above: Moïse Compaoré.

ATD Fourth World invites people around the world to document real-life “Stories of Change”. These stories are about situations of injustice and exclusion caused by extreme poverty. Written by activists, community leaders, and others, they show that when people work together, real change can happen.

[More about “Stories of Change”.](#)

By Moïse Compaoré (Ivory Coast)

## Terrible conditions

Let’s talk about what we went through in the Bouaké Penal Camp. [Joseph Wresinski](#) came to visit the prisoners in the camp. He gathered them together and told them that they must support each other to survive in such terrible living conditions.

Prisoners’ feet were chained together whenever they went out. Even if a man went to get

medical care he had to have chains around his ankles.

## **No one trusted anyone else**

The prisoners asked Father Joseph how they could possibly support one another when life in the penal camp was all about pushing others down. Friendship wasn't possible in a place where prisoners were all suspicious of each other. There was a lot of violence in the penal camp and everyone walked around with a knife. No one trusted anyone else. It was impossible to imagine any kind of supportive community in a place like that.

## **In a hopeless situation, one person believed things could change**

After Joseph Wresinski's visit, Sister Simone kept visiting us. Sister Simone told us that "Learning Clubs" were central to ATD Fourth World's work. "So, let's start with something like that."

But the prisoners were skeptical. It sounded ridiculous to think about learning anything in a prison camp where we were just trying to get enough to eat to stay alive. To live in such appalling conditions ends up injuring people. It makes you into a kind of animal.

So Sister Simone brought us some chalk and they started writing on the walls, even on the cell doors, to teach reading to those who didn't know how. Another inmate said, "I know how to act out a skit!"

*Giving an inmate something to smile about—just sharing a smile with anyone who is suffering—that gives someone a lot, more than you could ever imagine.*

And so our group became bigger and our feeling of unity became stronger. Through these regular activities with Sister Simone and other [ATD Volunteer Corps members](#) who sometimes joined her visits to the prison, we came to understand the larger meaning of what Father Joseph had said to us.

## **When you make something beautiful, people will respect you**

After teaching each other to read and doing skits together, we made some sculptures. I used to carve before. So Sister Simone collected wood and told me to start carving.

She always asked us to give the best of ourselves. Sometimes we didn't understand. "When you make something that is beautiful, other people will respect you", she said. The Learning Club taught us how true that is. When we get together and work as a group,

things really can change.



## We are people too

All her life, Sister Simone fought and triumphed one heart at a time. She did this everywhere she went—at church, with doctors, with hospital staff, even with people in the neighborhood around the prison. She invited people to visit us in prison, not to give us food or presents. She invited them simply to talk with us, to learn to respect us, and see that we are people too.

The Justice Minister, Jacqueline Oble came to visit the prison and Sister Simone showed her a sculpture that Soro, one of us, had made. The Minister said, “It’s beautiful.”

So that’s how the sculpture came to be in Notre Dame of Yamoussouko and everyone marveled at it. The sculpture brought honor to the prisoners, to the guards, and to the Bouaké church. It was something the whole country was proud of.

*From that time on, the prison administration began to look at us differently. Even the prison guards looked at us differently. We also started to believe in ourselves.*

Since then, every year there is a pilgrimage. People of every religion come together.

It’s a great source of pride for us to know that everything we did back then to build bonds

of friendship and determination is part of a larger effort that continues to this day.

Below video of Moïse Compaoré talking about his experience in the prison.



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