

A NEW DAY DAWNS



In 2017 ATD Fourth World invited people around the world to document real-life “Stories of Change” starting from situations of injustice and exclusion caused by

extreme poverty. These stories, from activists, community leaders, and others, show that when people work together, real change can happen. For more about the "[Stories of Change](#)".

By Blaise Ndeenga (Cameroon)

"Friends of Mandela", a group of young ex-convicts from Cameroon, demonstrate that there is life after prison and hopes and dreams to fulfill.

On the International Day of the African Child, 16 June 2016, "Les amis de Mandela" ("Friends of Mandela"), a group that brings together ex-convicts, organised an event to inform the public about their activities. The leader of this group spoke out:

"Dear friends, we are all former juvenile convicts, between the ages of 17 and 22. Each one of us has spent at least six months in prison. Some have been sentenced, others have been held in temporary detention without conviction.... it doesn't matter! We are free now and we do not want to go back to prison! Society constantly rejects us. We are stereotyped, insulted, discriminated against.

Prison broke us, but society crushes us. It was time for us to recover, to write another story and to find our place in society.

We had to come together to do that. We had nothing! But we had our intelligence, our solidarity, our compatibility, our resourcefulness... We were convinced that you can move quickly on your own, but go further as a group.

We had learned things in prison: basketwork, sculpture, painting, and woodwork. We had to develop our different talents. We could only count on ourselves. We had no money, no support.... our raw material was found in nature, in trashcans, in recycled materials. We had to give our objects shape and beauty, and make them attractive. Our sense of creativity, our hands, and our ability to work together are our weapons.... and the result is the originality of our work.

We began exhibiting our artwork along a road used by expats. Many were impressed and, one thing leading to another, we soon had a network of clients. None of them knew about our past. The usual questions were about our training: "Which school did you attend?"

One day, I gave this reply to a lady who was insisting on her son coming to be trained at our "school": "We went to the prison school".

"What do you mean?" she replied. "Where is it?"

I replied, "We are all ex-convicts and we learned all this in prison. We wanted to show that there is life after prison, and hopes and dreams to fulfill. We only wanted to be

normal citizens in a society that does not make it easy for us.”

[Read more Stories of Change.](#)