

## WHERE WE STARTED



In the year 1994 when South Africa transitioned from apartheid to democracy, a group of individuals from diverse backgrounds met to establish a think tank on juvenile justice. This committee's task was to draw up a White Paper on Youth Justice. This eventually became the Child Justice Bill which has as its key tenets diversion out of the justice system, community courts and community and victim involvement in legal decisions.

One of the principal drafters of the legislation was criminologist Don Pinnock who, concerned at the lack of diversion options once the Bill became law, undertook extensive research into traditional approaches to adolescent containment. He subsequently produced a programme, published as *Gangs, Rituals and Rites of Passage*, which stressed the importance of ancient rites and rituals in youth development and the value of wilderness as a site of powerful transformatory experience for inner-city adolescents.

Pinnock's study gave rise to a conference attended by representatives from several state departments, NGO's and respected Zulu shaman, Credo Mutwa. At this conference Usiko was birthed - named by Mutwa (the name means a number of things, including 'first ritual', 'new beginning') - and tasked with the community-based development of the rites of passage technology.

"The aim of Usiko was, therefore, to create programmes for young people at risk that were restorative, in line with the pending legislation, and combined rituals, both ancient and modern, with the challenging and healing environment of the earth's great wilderness areas. It aimed, in short, to unlock the potential of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds".

Other founding members of Usiko were Andrew Muir of the Wilderness Leadership School, Marion Goodman of Educo, and Philip van Zyl who was tasked with the responsibility of operationalising the process."

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The community in Jamestown, Stellenbosch, was deeply concerned about issues facing the local youth that left them vulnerable to school drop-out, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, negative social and mental health issues and crime. When the new primary health clinic opened in Jamestown in 2000, the clinic manager contacted newly appointed professor of community psychology,

Tony Naidoo, in the Psychology department at Stellenbosch University to look into what could be done. At a community forum involving the school principals, teachers, pastors, clinic staff and community leaders, Prof Naidoo and his students were given the mandate to provide psychological services at the schools and the Don amp; Pat Bilton Primary Health Clinic but were challenged to “do something for our youth!” Many youth attending the schools are children of farm workers trapped in circumstances of poverty. Usiko Stellenbosch was established in 2000 in response to the various concerns expressed by this community group.

With funding provided by the Usiko Trust, a group of community volunteers were recruited to begin to shape a response to the community mandate. The initial group consisted of 13 male volunteers which included the high school principal, life orientation teacher, the school janitor, a farm manager, agricultural assistant, two psychologists linked to Stellenbosch University, a furniture salesman, an unemployed person and a youth worker appointed by the Usiko Trust. Using a participatory action model, this diverse group used a 'Circle of Wisdom' approach to begin to share their own experiences, understanding and aspirations for building the youth programme from ground level.

Using the philosophical cornerstones of the Usiko Trust (Wilderness, Rites of Passage, mentoring, and positive youth development), group processes were initiated, rituals such as the 'Check-in' were created and methods were discussed to bring about meaningful change. Postgraduate Psychology students also began to assist with training, counselling and facilitating group sessions and an interaction between student and community volunteers began to emerge combining academic knowledge with local indigenous knowledge.

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The word 'Usiko' derives from Zulu and refers to "First Ritual or First Cut" (implying ritual marking of 'Rites of Passage'). Usiko also means "New beginning" and these meanings lend focus to a programme of interventions aimed at some of the most vulnerable and at risk male youth aged 13-18 in the local community (followed two years later by girls programmes, aged 12 - 18).

These interventions build on the Circle of Courage (by fostering a sense of belonging, mastery, independence generosity) and seek to build resilience, self- esteem, interdependence, a genuine sense of restorative justice and civic responsibility and a healthy sense of adventure and risk.

These interventions involve Wilderness Therapy, Life Skills, Educational and Skills Development and Mentoring. Through encouraging staying in school to complete education, building trusting relationships and setting goals towards a hopeful, sustainable future, Usiko's mission is to provide guidance and support towards a caring and responsible adulthood.

Over the sixteen years of operation, 15000 youth beneficiaries have been impacted by Usiko's school-based programmes, diversion programmes and sport and recreation programmes. Approximately 80% of graduates have been supported to complete their high school education with several advancing to successfully complete tertiary education.

Significantly, many youth mentees return after completing high school to become mentors; several also to become staff members and service providers.

## CONTACT US

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