The Prisons Transformation Project run by the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) illustrates some measure of how prisoners and gangsters can change. But prison staff members need to change too. The changes that have taken place at Pollsmoor Prison since 1997 have taught me a lot. They have made me realise how important it is to change the nature of the prison itself. But to accomplish that we need to show prison staff that change is in their interest too.

I have worked in the prison system for a long time. I arrived from Mossel Bay in the Eastern Cape to join the Department of Correctional Services in 1977. I joined the...
Department because my cousin was a prison warder at the time and recommended it as a good, stable job, even though being coloured meant limited career prospects in the prison system. I had worked a few months in the prison in Mossel Bay as an untrained probation warder. It was only when I was sent to the Westlake Training College, near Pollsmoor Prison, that I received basic training as a prison warder. All coloured staff of the Department of Correctional Services went to this college for training during the apartheid era.

The basic course for warders lasted six months and constituted purely military training. In fact, the army trained the course instructors. Training consisted of military drill, saluting, showing respect to senior officers and handling a range of firearms. We even had a course on military drill, saluting, showing respect to senior officers trained the course instructors. Training consisted of six months and lasted six months and

**We even had a course on how to behave at formal dances but there was nothing about working with prisoners**

After I completed the basic training course, I became a senior instructor. I too was now a “military man” and spent my days getting my trainees fit and drilling them over and over in military etiquette. On weekends I worked at Pollsmoor Prison in what is now known as the Admissions Centre. I remained an instructor at Westlake Training College for many years. When it closed in 1989, I was manager of the physical training department.

In 1989 the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU) was formed. I was one of its founder members, as were many warders then based at Westlake Training College. At the time, I was transferred to “Maximum” (now the Admission Centre) at Pollsmoor Prison. Working full time at Pollsmoor Prison came as a big shock to me. I was posted in a section popularly known as “Boipatong” (the name of a conflict-ridden township on the Eastrand in the former Transvaal province), which held sentenced prisoners still awaiting further trials. Almost daily, stabbings and fights took place among the prisoners, but I handled myself with confidence because of my self-defence training. Prisoners and staff respected my physical strength, which made me feel on top of the world.

That feeling did not last long though. I found myself constantly challenging the white warders in the section. I did not like the inhuman way they treated the prisoners. They locked the gates and unlocked them again when required. They counted the prisoners regularly. They did not even bother to open the cell gates to pass food to prisoners but just pushed the plates under the gate. There were seldom opportunities for prisoners to take exercise; when prisoners were let out into the courtyard, fights usually broke out. Guard dogs were kept in sections where prisoners slept, which created enormous fear and tension.

Coloured warders were not allowed to enter the staff offices or to sit on chairs in the prison. I challenged white warders about this too. Because of my attitude and the fact that I outranked some of them, white warders in the section were reluctant to work with me. Eventually I, together with a few other warders, was asked to leave the section on a trumped-up charge.

I then spent brief periods in the prison visitors’ section and the library. In 1992 I was posted as head of the juvenile prison in Section B4, which although physically attached to the women’s prison had a separate entrance. Legislation had just been passed to separate children from adults in prison. Section B4 held juveniles aged fourteen to seventeen. I had 12 staff and a full-time social worker in the section. It was the first time in Pollsmoor Prison that a coloured warden was placed in charge of white staff.

It was here that I began to work more closely with individuals and civil society groups from outside the prison, particularly the National Institute for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO). My staff and I tried to develop caring relationships with the children in our charge. We made contact with their families and ran a literacy programme. We also received support from some of the local schools and a number of the children were able to write exams, thus pursuing an education in prison.

I had recently become a father. The experience and emotions stirred by fatherhood helped me to develop nurturing relationships with the children in Section B4. We treated them with the care that any child deserves —after all they were children with the same needs of children elsewhere. We tried to improve their nutrition and organised games as best we could. We did all this despite having few available resources. And it worked. The behaviour of the children in Section B4 improved; their response to us improved. The prison itself was now kept neat and clean. Both prison staff and the children slowly learned the importance of respecting, rather than fearing, each other.

Mr. Johnny Jansen was appointed head of Pollsmoor Prison’s Admission Centre in 1997. It was the first time a black person was appointed to this senior post in the prison. Soon after he arrived, a departmental task force raided the prison without his knowledge and assaulted a number of prisoners. A huge crisis ensued, as black prison staff believed that the whole thing was a set-up to get rid
off Mr. Jansen. I, together with some other prison staff, supported him through the crisis, as we believed that the prison could improve under a more sensitive, black leadership.

With Mr. Jansen as head of the prison, the institution has become a very different place to work in. It is no longer dominated by whites desperate to retain power. Mr. Jansen’s approach is to tackle difficult problems head on. Gangs are one of the biggest threats to transformation in the prison, as they control almost every aspect of prison life — distribution of food and clothes, sexual relationships and so forth. They are also responsible for much of the violence and corruption in the prison.

At the time, CCR had already been working at Pollsmoor Prison for a couple of years, mostly with the juveniles in the Medium A prison. Mr. Jansen requested CCR to target one of the gang floors, Section D3. I was asked to work in this section, which has been the biggest challenge I have had to face in my life so far. I called on the experience I had gained working with the children in Section B4. There, I had learned the importance of a daily structured programme for prisoners, especially for the awaiting-trial prisoners who have little else to do but wait for a court date.

CCR staff assisted me with putting together this daily programme. Not only did we begin a series of workshops with CCR, but we also set up an initiative for volunteers to hold monthly workshops after hours in the cells. After a year and a half of working in Section D3 (at the time of writing), we have made giant strides. The section is far safer than it used to be. There are very few assaults, even though members of different gangs are held in the same cells. We have managed to create a more co-operative environment by teaching the prisoners in this section how to relate to and respect each other and how to deal with conflict constructively. I myself have learnt a tremendous amount about these issues. For example, I can now go into a tense situation and defuse it by talking to prisoners constructively rather than threatening them.

But this change has happened in just one small section of Pollsmoor Prison. There are two other gang and numerous other sections. The lessons learnt in Section D3 need to be spread more widely throughout the prison. Other prison staff members need to learn these lessons and skills too. Although South African prisons have been formally demilitarized, this has not been the case in practice. A military culture is still rife in our prisons. Some prison staff still believe that all their job entails is keeping prisoners behind bars and continue to misuse the power and authority that come with their uniform — a sad legacy of apartheid. Most likely, their training has been just like mine when I started my career in prison services, which teaches nothing about building human relationships in the prison.

Prison staff need to be made aware that it is not just the prisoners’ but their own lives that will improve if they embrace transformation and move from a military to a human rights culture in prison. They can accomplish this by acquiring the necessary skills to relate differently to prisoners and each other, but first they must want to change. Rather than merely waiting for retirement, it is possible to feel fulfilled working in prison services. It is unfortunate that most prison staff have been working within a militaristic culture for so long that they cannot even imagine that things can be done differently to change the prison environment.

All staff members need exposure to training programmes that teach respect for diversity and celebrate cultural and individual differences. We must all undergo courses in conflict resolution and mediation, as conflict is part and parcel of any environment, including prisons. Basic training for prison staff needs to change too. While in-service training is important for older staff members, it would help if basic training taught incoming staff how to relate to prisoners within a human rights framework. Slowly but surely a humane culture will take root in our prisons.

The Department of Correctional Services and its prisons were very badly impacted on by apartheid. Prison services were turned into a military force. Most staff members have not been re-trained to meet the demands of prison under a democratic order. We continue in our old ways mostly out of sheer ignorance of the benefits of change. Without being taught how to change, it is difficult for us to see that there is another, more constructive way to work in prisons. With the small miracle in Section D3 at Pollsmoor Prison, we have caught a glimpse that things can change, if we ourselves change and are prepared to change. By engaging with our own change, we surely will be able to inspire the prisoners in our care to change too. It is a basic truth that regardless of our different roles as staff members and prisoners, we are all human beings engaging with each other and making up the prison community. As such, we need each other so that we can be the best we can, like in any other community.

If we all believe in and really want it, nouvelle (new) Pollsmoor Prison, a place of peace and constructive human relations, could just be over the horizon. After all, we hardly believed that South Africa would become a democracy before the millennium was out. And now we live in the miracle of a democratic South Africa! What further proof do we need that change for the better is possible?

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The term "warder" describes how staff members of the Department of Correctional Services under apartheid were seen. As suggested, the term indicates the main role of staff at the time — the jailer who kept the keys to the cells so that the "wards" (prisoners) would not escape. Today, we are still known as "correctional officers", officers of the Department of Correctional Services. I think the fact that we are referred to (even by ourselves) as "officers" says something about a lasting military legacy linked to prisons under apartheid, even though the Department of Correctional Services has officially been demilitarized. I think we should start thinking of and referring to ourselves more as "prison staff members"; this would indicate that we do not see ourselves as part of the military or security establishment, but as members of a government department, sharing equal status with civil servants in other departments.