

Streetscapes News



From Jesse...

In this month's newsletter, I want to introduce our Safe Sobering Space pilot: a small but important shift in how we support the people most often turned away.

We took a corner of an existing Safe Space, brought in trained peer workers with lived experience, and asked a simple question: what if we just let people show up as they are? The answer surprised even us.

Jesse

Quiet Heroes Under the Bridges

Every night in Cape Town's CBD, more than 800 people sleep under our bridges — not in hidden camps, but in the City's Safe Spaces. Long Nutec shelters with beds, lockers, showers, and security. They're designed as stepping stones, not destinations. But the reality inside is tougher.

Social workers juggle impossible caseloads. Jobs and housing are scarce. And the biggest barrier of all — substance use — pushes away the very people who need help most. When someone arrives intoxicated, they disrupt dorms, get removed, or simply leave. The cycle repeats.

This gap almost took the City of Cape Town to court. People facing eviction argued they'd been offered "help" that didn't actually accommodate substance users — because it didn't.



So Streetscapes offered a different solution:

Give us one corner of a Safe Space.

Let our trained peer workers — people with lived experience — run it.

Let intoxicated people come in without fear, sleep safely, and wake up with dignity.

Start helping from there.

On 1 November, the pilot began. No fanfare. Just 12 beds and two peers arriving every night at 8pm, ready for whatever walked through the door.

In five months, those beds were used more than 251 times by 165 people. Incidents? Barely any.



The peer workers were so good at calming and de-escalating that they quickly became the first point of contact for mental-health crises too.

The real surprise?

59% came back for one-on-one sessions about their substance use — voluntarily. From that, weekly group sessions formed. People wanted connection, not punishment.

And the peers? They've become the quiet heroes of the night — steady, compassionate, and carrying the same scars as the people they welcome.

The most stabilising thing is simply being allowed to arrive messy, struggling, even under the influence — and not be shown the door.

A tiny corner of a shelter became a different kind of safe space entirely - And it's working.

We're building spaces where dignity comes first, whether through safe nights, meaningful work, or permanent housing.

Meet Bonnie

Bonnie is the backbone of one of the Safe Sobering Spaces run by Streetscapes. She runs the night shift with calm authority — steering the team, de-escalating crises, and creating a stable space for people arriving intoxicated, overwhelmed, or vulnerable.

What drives her leadership is lived experience. Once a Streetscapes client herself, Bonnie knows exactly what it feels like to walk in uncertain and exhausted. That insight shapes her approach: steady, empathetic, and free of judgment.

Her goal is simple but powerful — to make sure every person who comes through the door feels safe enough to breathe, settle, and regain control. Under Bonnie's watch, the Safe Sobering Space becomes more than a place to sober up. It becomes a place where dignity leads the way.



Bonnie talks about Safer Space

Tell us a bit about the safe space itself...

Bonnie is a supervisor - working from 8 pm-5 pm. Work with intoxicated clients - keep them there the whole night, they come and sleep there. Previously, they were asked to sleep outside, even in the rain, which is especially dangerous for women who are intoxicated and exposed to the weather.



Now we keep them in the Safe Space and support them with psychosocial services. They speak to social workers at Streetscapes to get further information. We provide blankets, food, and a space to sleep, and we also keep their belongings safe when they are intoxicated.

Peers work night shifts, and some are on day shifts. They support the team at the Safe Space. They assist with intake and exit, monitor behaviour, and show staff how to work with people on the streets. We have 12 beds.

Tasks: Make sure clients are safe, support them throughout the night, clean messes created by intoxicated clients (such as peeing and defecating) — basically like a nurse.

Role and typical day & night:

During the day: contracts, reports, HIV testing and other tests, counselling for all clients, referrals, and support at the clinic. At night: support clients throughout the night.

How personal journey shapes work:

Bonnie was homeless herself and enjoys supporting others who have lived outside. She always hopes things will get better for them, just as they did for her. She encourages clients to join the programme — her life was shaped when she joined Streetscapes.

She was a mental health client and “a mess.” Zoli played a huge role in her life; without her, she would not be here. Bonnie wants to give back and have the same impact on others.

What makes the Safe Sobering Space different from other services:

Other services do not accept intoxicated people, which makes them feel vulnerable. Clients are often discriminated against and feel they do not belong. Now, the Safe Space offers a service that makes them feel they belong and helps restore their dignity.

Bonnie helps at the Safe Space, assisting with social work tasks. Our clients are mostly intoxicated. Although we have 12 beds, we extend support beyond that when needed. Twelve beds are enough for now.



Most rewarding part of work:

Supporting clients, helping them access clinics, take medication, create IDs, and eventually join the Streetscapes programme. Some become peers themselves, helping others — the cycle and impact of the programme motivate her every day.

What Happens When We Stop Looking Away: Discarded

On a cool Cape Town evening, people filed into the worn, iconic Labia Theatre — a place where carpets hold stories and the projector hums like an old urban heartbeat.

Streetscapes brought staff, supporters, and nearly fifty residents to witness something raw: *Discarded*, the documentary carved out by filmmaker Sheona Mitchley.

At its centre is Mhlupheki Nhlapo, a recycler in Johannesburg's underbelly — a man who builds his world from everything the city spits out.

Dawn to dusk, he drags his trolley through harsh streets, claiming scraps of value from mountains of indifference.

But when violence erupts and sends him home to confront old wounds, the story changes shape. What was meant to be a film about recycling becomes a portrait of a man stitched together by grit, humour, and scars.

As the camera follows him, the bigger truth surfaces: society discards people with the same casual ease it discards its rubbish. And the gap between "ordinary life" and the streets isn't a canyon — it's a crack anyone can fall through.



In the theatre, the audience shifted from curiosity to a kind of charged silence. Mhlupheki's contradictions — swaggering one moment, fragile the next — landed harder than any narration could. He stayed with people. He didn't let go.

Discarded doesn't preach. It doesn't tidy up the mess. It simply forces the viewer to stare straight at a life we're trained to ignore. And once you've seen it, you can't unsee it.

Now, talks have begun between Sheona and Streetscapes about telling more of these hidden stories across Cape Town — shorter pieces, longer journeys, whatever form they need to take. Because this city, like any city, is full of people living right at the edge of visibility.

And sometimes, the first step toward change is simply refusing to look away.

Meet the staff: Tandeka Gxalatana

What is your role at Streetscapes?

My role in this program is to provide holistic support to clients by addressing their psychosocial needs, ensuring they have access to relevant services, and empowering them to improve their overall well-being.

I also contribute to program implementation through client engagement, case management, and collaboration with stakeholders to ensure quality service delivery.

What drew you to working with Streetscapes?

I was drawn to this organisation because of its commitment to supporting vulnerable communities and creating meaningful, lasting impact.

The focus on dignity, empowerment, and inclusive services aligns strongly with my personal and professional values as a social worker.

What are you most excited about in your role?

I am mostly excited about making a direct impact in people's lives, to walk alongside clients in their journey, and to see positive change over time.

I also value the opportunity to continuously learn and grow while working within a supportive and purpose-driven team.

What does being part of Streetscapes mean to you?

Being part of this organization means being part of something bigger than myself.

It represents purpose, service, and the opportunity to contribute to meaningful change in society while working with a team that shares the same vision and passion.

What motivates you in the work that you do?

What motivates me is seeing the resilience of the people I work with and knowing that my support can make a difference, even in small ways.

The possibility of helping someone move towards stability, hope, and independence keeps me driven and committed.



Meet the staff: Chuneke Damons

What is your role at Streetscapes?

I am a Social Worker at Streetscapes, where I work directly with individuals experiencing homelessness. My role involves providing support, guidance, and interventions that assist clients in improving their circumstances and working toward reintegration and stability.

What drew you to working with Streetscapes?

I completed my field practice at Streetscapes from 2020 to 2024, and during that time I developed a deep passion for working with individuals experiencing homelessness. The exposure and hands-on experience ignited my commitment to this field.

What are you most excited about in your role?

What excites me most is witnessing the growth and transformation of my clients. Seeing individuals move toward becoming better versions of themselves, despite the challenges they face, reminds me why I chose this profession.

What does being part of Streetscapes mean to you?

Being part of Streetscapes means being part of a community that is committed to restoring dignity and creating opportunities for change. It represents hope, impact, and the chance to contribute to meaningful, lasting change in people's lives.

What motivates you in the work that you do?

I am motivated by the desire to improve the lives of people living on the streets and to challenge and change the negative narratives often associated with homelessness. I believe in the potential of every individual and what can be achieved.



If you found this newsletter interesting...

Then consider passing this newsletter on to people you know who would appreciate gaining a greater insight into the plight of the homeless.

You can visit our website at www.streetscapes.org.za, or email us at: info@streetscapes.org.za.