

Hamlet holds hands to cut crime Teamwork between police and community pays off

DOMINEE Roelf Opperman says the story of his congregation is “just one of the beautiful ones”. Two years ago, the good people of Kameeldrift, outside Pretoria, were in hell. In just seven months, there had been 49 armed attacks on them, and numerous housebreakings. Two people had been murdered and a teenage girl had been raped.



PICTURE: CARA VIERECKL ON PATROL IN KAMEELDRIFT: Homeowners in this were area used to living as if under siege. Then the community came up with a crime-combating plan, involved the minister of police, and got involved in the community, which saw greater police presence and a drop in crime. Resident Veronica Roach, left, witnessed intruders shoot her husband dead and wound her son.

Police patrols didn't seem to be able to fathom the maze of plots that wind in and out through sandy, red tracks. It sometimes took hours for a blue light's response. White rightwingers were using the Pretoria hamlet as an example of the genocide they insisted was taking place.

"We decided we simply can't go on like that," says Opperman, and so he opened his heart to the people, white and black, battling their fears in the pews of his Dutch Reformed Church.

"So we came up with a crimecombating plan, and part of the plan was telling a story of good hope."

The ANC's former chief whip in the National Assembly was only three weeks into his new job as minister of safety and security in Kgalema Motlanthe's cabinet when he got an invitation from the people of Kameeldrift. Nathi Mthethwa accepted, and within a few days, the minister was deep in prayer with a community that was bleeding.

Almost immediately after that, the number of police officers operating in the area increased. Helicopters were organised, and police dogs moved in. Kameeldrift was divided into four sectors for a closer watch, "and the whole area took hands".

The relationship with Mthethwa, now minister of police, has resonated since that day when he solemnly promised besieged families that "attacks would be wiped out, tooth and nail".

"We started a family clinic here at our church where counselling, psychology and mediating to deal with the crime was offered for the whole community. Trauma groups were run in all the schools, and children were given life skills.

"We tried to get the community together – the police and the angry people. We facilitated talks with the security forces, and then we started a Section 21 company, which got us really got involved in the community," Opperman explains. "We said, 'If we don't do something about poverty, nothing is going to happen'."

Two years after the predictions of the genocide doomsayers, Kameeldrift has a child development centre, which has seen four protégés out of the informal settlements of Plots 175 and 123 become canoeing champions. Residents of Kameeldrift spent many months showing them how to row on the nearby Roodeplaat Dam. Opperman is proud.

"We also have a centre where we do entrepreneurial training, and we're installing solar panels in the informal settlements so that the people there have lights and power points. Really everything, all of this, started out of the crime."

One of the community's most buoyant anti-crime ambassadors is 28-year-old Sello Dijotope, who lives on Plot 175. He has made it his crusade to find jobs for the "poorest of the poorest", by starting his own skills-implementation project.

"We are a new generation. We don't want crime. So we have to make sure people have jobs so that they can put bread on the table. If people can provide for their families, then those people can't go back to steal from the residents.

"Crime was hot. Now it's down. We use the police station to check the fingerprints of those people who want to work, and then we use our relationships that we are building with business and the people and in the surrounding areas to find them work. Everything is improving, and we are happier."

"Drinking coffee regularly" with the Kameeldrift police station commander, and telling each other stories, led to strong friendships with the men and women in uniform. Their presence is visible. There is a fresh open-mindedness, a confidence Kameeldrift has not felt in years.

Dominee Ben Fourie of the Gereformeerde Kerk in Kameeldrift says the community policing forum has "worked hard for safety".

"We get almost daily reports from them of all the crime in this area, as well as the arrests – and there are so many arrests. We are trying to get more and more of our people involved, and we do it through sharing our food and clothing. A lot of people respond to that kind of thing.

"I also see it affecting my own life. In the early morning, when I take my walk up and down with my dog, people greet me, 'Hey, moruti!' We are all working towards a better picture, and we're glad of that."

The chief director of communications in the Ministry of Police, Zweli Mnisi, says they're "immensely respectful" of what has happened in Kameeldrift. "This is what we want to see. This is how joint operations can work when you partner with communities. We look at it as a value chain; we see it as a strategic thing. You cannot fight crime from Facebook. We have to be there, on the ground. It's about teamwork."

Mthethwa believes the resolve shown in partnerships between the police and ordinary South Africans is the most compelling part of fighting crime. "We cannot overlook (those) who dedicate their lives (and) patriotically commit themselves to helping the police fight crime."

Kameeldrift's healing has taken more than two years. But no one has forgotten the murder of popular teacher Rudi Roach, which brought their plight to national attention.

It was about 2am when his wife Veronica woke up. The men were already in the room. Then she heard a shot. The next thing, she saw her husband's silhouette crumpling to the floor.

"I shouted out, 'Lord God, help me.' And the next thing, (her son) Rudiger was in the room. They started shooting at him. He ran, they ran after him."

Rudiger knew they were going to kill him. They'd shot him again, this time in the back at point-blank range. As he fled downstairs, a man was standing in the open doorway against the moonlight. The teenager threw his cellphone at him and lunged for him.

Then, as suddenly as the terror had started, everything was finished. The man got up and fled with the others. Outside on the sand track that was their escape, hares stretched into gentle leaps and frogs murmured. Owls watched. It was as if nothing had happened.

Roach was one of the nearly 50 people still murdered in South Africa every day, according to the annual crime statistics announced on Thursday. Radash Anandlali, 51, was another. He was shot and stabbed to death in his farmhouse in Cramond, Pietermaritzburg, on Sunday. A man who apparently worked on his farm has been arrested.

A 42-year-old man was beaten to death by a village mob after he was released from custody on Wednesday. He had been arrested for the murder of a woman at Qhutyini village in Engcobo, but released due to lack of evidence. The crowd used spades and sharp objects to kill him.

Perhaps most devastating was the abduction and murder of a six-yearold girl who had been living with her aunt in Slovo Park, Springs. A family friend asked her to leave the house with him

on Monday. When she was not back that evening, police started a search, and her body was found on Wednesday in a nearby field. A man has been charged.

Despite this debasement of our trust in each other, the crime statistics reveal a strong swing away from the horror murder numbers of 1994 and 1995, when at least 26 000 people were killed each year.

Even as the world propelled us forward as its conscience after the first democratic election, we were developing the reputation of being its murder capital. Now, for the first time in many years, the SAPS has managed to bring the number of murdered down, below 17 000, with Mthethwa also announcing a "significant" decrease in the rate of other crimes in the past year.

Yet, even as success stories like Kameeldrift give us an emotional lift, many are still sceptical of the accuracy of crime statistics. Detractors are especially suspicious of the 4.4 percent drop in sexual crimes, with 68 332 cases reported compared to 70 514 cases in 2009.

Women and Men Against Child Abuse has, for instance, questioned how the figures on offences against children are collected and measured.

"Found bodies can be counted and statistics on murders are far more possible to correlate," says the organisation's executive director, Miranda Friedmann. The NGO also worries about the national statistics on the neglect of children, which show a drop of 0.5 percent in 2010, with 4 014 cases compared to 4 034 in 2009. It believes such a drop cannot be accurately measured as the special police unit which dealt only with crimes against children has effectively been disbanded.

"There are no longer specialised teams trained to interview and take accurate statements from children," says Friedmann. "To measure crimes against children will always remain contentious. Police services are inadequate."

The absence of drug-related crimes in the national statistics has also caused concern, particularly since the specialised South African Narcotics Bureau was effectively shut down a few years ago.

Months ago, it was stated there had been an 87 percent increase in drug crime, but there is no proof of that in the document given out on Thursday.

Some will be carefully examining the SAPS's impending annual report against the crime statistics. That report is expected before the end of the month, and Mthethwa and National Police Commissioner General Bheki Cele will be preparing to fend off more direct criticism. Old antipathy towards the ANC's "onesize-fits-all" approach to crime under former national commissioner Jackie Selebi needs to be considered, and the minister has vowed, repeatedly, to correct the mistakes of the past.

Yet the SAPS annual report, unlike the crime stats, will surely have to reflect on what has been a rather difficult and controversial year for the police.

In defending plans to give officers greater licence to use lethal force, Deputy Minister Fikile Mbalula sparked international debate last year when he said it was “unavoidable” that innocents would get shot in the crossfire between police and criminals.

Mthethwa, Mbalula and Cele all expressed the view that there was too heavy a discretionary burden on the police. But many later blamed their shoot-to-kill policy on the tragic death of Midrand toddler Atlegang Aphane, who was killed when police mistook a metal pipe which he was holding for a gun.

Another 11 innocent bystanders died, and at least 29 others were killed in officers’ negligent handling of their weapons.

The Independent Complaints Directorate’s latest report also showed a 15 percent rise in deaths in police custody and a 5 percent increase in complaints against officers. Last year’s SAPS annual report showed a 31 percent rise in civil legal claims against it, with police spending R7.5-billion or 18 percent of the total budget, after assaults, shootings, damage to property and car accidents involving cops.

Yet Mnisi urged a positive approach. “I believe we are being vindicated.

“The facts are speaking volumes. We are trying to deploy the right units in the right areas, and we think that is paying off. We know that the misplacement of resources has been a bad thing in the past.



“But definitely our approach is not to sit there and gloat. This is the beginning of the work; it’s not the time to start sitting on our laurels.”

www.thestar.co.za