

Mending the lives of the destitute

A kibbutz in the Boland

A NOVEL project is taking shape at Worcester in the Boland. Kibbutz El-Shammah is the idea of a handful of individuals who witnessed the intense need of destitute people in their community.

In the years before 1983 gangsterism was rife in the town. People in the lower income areas lived in constant fear of their lives because of gang warfare. Erena van de Venter, then a social worker with the Child and Family Welfare Society, decided to tackle the problem. After four years of working with the different gangs a breakthrough occurred in 1987 when former gang territories were declared open ground. Gang fights ceased and the local community was once again free to live a normal life.

Then a new need was identified. Reformed gangsters expressed concern about the increasing numbers of street children in Worcester. After working with these children for a while a home, named "Moria House", was established to accommodate them in 1990. It was found, however, that when the rehabilitated children returned to their families and to the same appalling conditions from which they had fled, they quickly fell into the same old patterns again. It was then that the idea of starting a kibbutz for the broken and destitute squatter families of Worcester emerged.

At this stage Erena van de Venter felt that working in a parastatal was too confining and often limited exploration of new work methods. She resigned her job at the beginning of the year and by April she had assembled a committee of seven people to make the idea of a kibbutz a reality.

Patty Esterhuize, a committee member, says projects like the kibbutz offer real opportunities to make a contribution in the community.

"For too long politicians have been too concerned with politics. They have operated with blinkers and have forgotten about the social problems of the community. I see my work at the kibbutz as a way of changing this and working towards the development of my people."

Their vision for the kibbutz is that it will be instrumental in healing people psychologically and restoring family units. They hope to return to the community eventually whole individuals who are functional in their families and able to make a contribution in the community.

The first phase of the main building at the



Patty Esterhuize and Erena van de Venter on site at the kibbutz.

kibbutz is nearing completion and the committee pays glowing tribute to contribution made by local people. The land was donated by the municipality which also sponsored a security fence for the property. A local architect offered to draw up plans for the buildings which will house 16 families. A donation by Community Chest took care of staffing and running cost.

Some 60 unemployed people were sent on building courses courtesy of the Department of Manpower. They received training in areas such as brick laying, plastering, brick making, carpentry and plumbing. At the end of the training course a project called "Action Employment" was launched to secure employment for those not employed in building the kibbutz.

At Kibbutz El-Shammah ("manifestation of God's presence") residents will be encouraged to live within a budget and be self-supporting. There are plans to establish a vegetable garden, fruit trees and a chicken run to provide food for the kibbutz community as well as generating income. An area has been set aside for a multi-purpose sports field which will serve the surrounding community of Roodewal as well. It is also hoped that some jobs will be created for unemployed people.

The committee feels that the involvement of the local community in the kibbutz is vital to its success. A number of farmers have already become involved in the project. Some have donated the use of their tractors and ploughing equipment, others have

offered advice and assistance with the design of the vegetable gardens.

The kibbutz will consist of eight accommodation units, each housing two families who will share ablution, laundry and cooking facilities.

The most destitute families will be chosen to live on the kibbutz for between two and five years, during which time they will hopefully acquire sufficient life skills to enable them to return to the community.

The main method of imparting skills is through activity, according to Erena van de Venter. "We believe in working, not in preaching," she said. Families will nevertheless also undergo an intense therapeutic programme.

The vocation training programme will include courses in cooking and kitchen management, gardening, shop management, handcrafts like carpentry and leather work, laundry skills, advanced household skills and obtaining a driver's licence.

Once a family is judged to have acquired enough life-skills they will either be re-introduced to the community or have the option of a more independent lifestyle on the kibbutz in separate residences called moshavs.

Kibbutz El-Shammah has already attracted widespread interest in this country and abroad. A young German nurse recently volunteered her services to the kibbutz and will shortly move into the almost completed administration block. The committee has also organised a conference for the end of October where they will share their experience with people from all over the country who have an interest in community development.

By SHIREEN BADAT