After high school, I flew down to Kumasi to attend the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology Honors Academy. For twelve(12) weeks, I lived in the University’s Honors dorms and attended college-level classes and activities. There were many personal projects I came up with. All my projects were fascinating but only one will stay with me for the rest of my life – in a very real sense, it changed the way I look at the world, and my place and purpose in it.

Looking back on it, using the internet search about the prison I would be visiting for eight(8) weeks was not the best idea… “ Gang violence’ out of control”, “657 fights/violent attacks in a year”, “one of Ghana’s scariest prisons”. I won’t go on, but suffice to say the list of articles, news stories and YouTube videos detailing the conditions there is long. Why was I going into prison with a reputation like this?

For 8 weeks I volunteered in Nsawam Prison as part of my personal project titled “Time With The Prisoners” which was aimed at understanding the psychology of prisoners and provide support as participants leave prison with the aim of reducing reoffending.

It was not what I expected. I have to admit my project had created a little trepidation about what would await. Like you reading this, I had never been inside a prison and to be perfectly honest, not spent a lot of time thinking about them or the people inside them. It turned out to be a moving experience which has had a big impact on me and my views of the criminal justice system and the role of prisons within them. Getting into a prison is rightly a challenge in terms of process, clearance, and physical searches; you rapidly get used to the echoing of keys and locks waiting for doors to be unlocked, opened, closed, and relocked for you.

Once in, I met the brilliant prison psychologist who also served as a lecturer at the university and we would then go to the prison gyms to deliver the ‘Sankofa’ program. The format of our sessions and program was straightforward, A targeted session of technique and work on physical activities aimed at improving their cognitive abilities followed by a group discussion with the psychologist discussing and exploring a range of issues. I truly believe the combination of physical exercise, learning and progressing a new skill and the group discussions had a significant impact on most participants. So, what are my takeaways for me?

Overall, the young men I met seemed to be a really good bunch of people. They really engaged with what we were doing, got on well together and were a pleasure to be with. I was genuinely shocked to hear some still had years of their sentences to serve. It reinforced my view that where people end up is largely a result of their circumstances, experiences and opportunities. Who is to say I wouldn’t have ended up inside given different experiences?

Exercise and sport are powerful forces that can help generate positive mindsets, relieve stress and enable people to change their lives. Post workout, I freely and willingly engaged in discussions on topics around their mental health skillfully managed by my partner psychologist. They reflected on positive changes and actions they could take, both inside and on release. I was surprised and impressed by their courage in speaking up about how they really felt.

Prison is a scary place. Does it work? Punishment? Yes, check…it’s certainly that, deterrence? I’m not convinced – look at reoffending rates. Rehabilitation? The experience does not seem to be designed to best rehabilitate: Locking young people in a cell for 90% of the day (worst cases some children leaving their cells for just 15 minutes a day), living in an environment where they don’t feel safe and violence is common, people being released with no idea of where they will go or stay or what they will do? Reoffending rates are highest in the 15-17 age group. I can’t help but feel society is shooting itself in the foot with a system that helps perpetuate crime and criminal behavior whilst costing over $95k+ a year per young person. I am sure most staff working in our prisons are doing the best they can given budget and other constraints and they should be applauded for their servitude, but there must be a better way of rehabilitating and as a result, reducing crime.

I feel privileged to have had this experience and worked with these young people and hope to repeat the experience in the future. As Fyodor Dostoevsky said, “The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons”. That is why I am left desperate to help them make a success of their lives on release; I have decided to do my part to meet this generational challenge and personally be involved in its solution – to understand people rather than feel sorry for them, to solve problems rather than treat symptoms. Whether I am organising community service events through New Leaf Inc., raising funds with Deux Leap to help purchase exercise equipment for prisons or simply trying to act more selflessly and responsibly in my daily life, I always find this experience in the back of my mind.

It is easy to feel powerless before such great responsibility – I know that there are many days when I worry that despite all my efforts to the contrary, I will not succeed, that, to borrow from David Mitchell, “my life may amount to nothing more than one drop in a limitless ocean.” “Yet what is any ocean, but a multitude of drops?”