

# Ex-cricket star rebuilds lives of deprived kids

Former Zimbabwean Test cricketer Henry Olonga, who famously protested Robert Mugabe's leadership, is now helping to restore hope to children of South Australian prisoners, **ADAM LANGENBERG** reports

**H**ENRY Olonga has had a score of second chances.

The raw Zimbabwean fast bowler's career could have been over when he was called for throwing in his debut Test match in 1995.

But the first black cricketer to represent Zimbabwe was instead sent to Adelaide to overhaul his action, and then went on to take 68 wickets in 30 Test matches.

When Olonga fled his homeland at the peak of his career after famously wearing a black armband to protest President Robert Mugabe's regime and the death of Zimbabwean democracy in 2003, help from a wealthy benefactor allowed him to start a new life in England.

Olonga, who obsessed over classical music after sitting next to his headmaster's wife at his all-boys boarding school near the Botswana border, turned to cricket commentary before giving into his love of music.

He now wows audiences as an opera singer in a field where that's well and truly an anomaly.

And Olonga got a second chance at love too. While in Henley Beach at Adelaide's Australian Cricket Academy as a 19-year-old to completely reform his action, he met a youth leader in her mid-20s, Tara Read.

They didn't meet again until December 2004 – shortly after Olonga's armband protest, and his then-fiancee calling off their engagement.

Alone in England, Olonga bought Ms Read a plane ticket to come and visit.

In preparation, they spoke incessantly and fell in love.

The pair married five



**PROTEST:** Henry Olonga and fellow cricketer Andy Flower.

months later and now live in Adelaide's southern suburbs with their two children, Talika, 7, and Lianna, 6.

The 42-year-old says it's fitting he's an ambassador for an organisation that wants children to break free of a cycle of crime and poverty, and remake themselves into whatever they want to be.

Second Chances SA works with the children of prisoners to help break the intergenerational cycle of offending.

Its chief executive Helen Glanville says the organisation is focused on helping "prisoners' kids" complete their schooling and realise their full potential.

The organisation makes contact by providing birthday presents, and then invites the kids to a series of mentoring programs and camps.

Ms Glanville met Olonga, a devout Christian, at Adelaide's annual prayer breakfast. She knew she wanted Olonga to be the public face of her organisation as soon as she heard him talk about his

journey, intensifying the moment she heard him sing.

Ms Glanville and two other members of Second Chances went to Olonga's house to convince him to join the organisation. Olonga was on board as their ambassador before she'd even finished her pitch.

"They just ticked so many boxes where I felt we were connected," Olonga said.

"I got a second chance in my cricket career. It's possible that the cricket authorities could have just looked at me and said he's too much work he's been called for throwing – see you later – but I got a second chance.

"There's just so many people who have helped me when I was at rock bottom after my protest – I want to give back."

Olonga says being gifted an air ticket out of hiding to England, plus the uncertainty of his early days in Britain means he's more attuned to be given a second chance.

"Now, I wasn't in prison,"



**BOWLED OVER:** Olonga and wife Tara Read.

he said. "But I kind of know what it's like to be at a place where you have no hope."

"And it seemed like the only way was down and I was starting my life from scratch."

"I had no friends, I was in a brand new country, I'd lost my career, lost my fiancé, lost everything."

"But here were total strangers wanting to get me back on my feet, and I see the importance of that."

Olonga was starting to hit his prime as a cricketer when he protested against Mugabe's leadership at the 2003 Cricket World Cup, alongside batsman Andy Flower.

He said his protest stemmed from five years of "wrestling with all the problems in Zimbabwe".

"I'm a man of faith and within faith lies this idea of questioning justice what's fair, what's unfair, what's right, what's wrong," he said.

"Living in a country with a dictator like Mugabe who was doing tremendous damage to the nation, he was taking farms from people ... he was torturing political opponents, he was throwing them in prison. He was allowing corruption to ruin the economy."

"At that time, in my mid-20s, I just felt I had to do something, I had to speak out. I couldn't stay silent in the midst of all the things I was coming to learn about Mugabe."

Olonga says he doesn't regret the protest despite the personal upheaval it caused,



**FRESH HOPE:** Olonga and Second Chances boss Helen Glanville.  
Picture: TRICIA WATKINSON

the death threats that followed, forcing him to leave Zimbabwe.

"My career was curtailed but so was the politics in Zimbabwe," he said.

"Everything was abnormal at the time and I would much rather not have had to put myself in a position where I felt I needed to protest against a dictator, if that dictator didn't exist. I'd much rather have just

focused on playing." After the protest, Olonga spent about a month holed up in a "wonderful community" in South Africa, hidden from public view.

David Tokoph – a wealthy aviation boss in South Africa – was Olonga's ticket out of hiding in South Africa, where he was receiving death threats.

Olonga says his benefac-

tor, who died in a plane crash, was "an interesting character" but will forever be grateful to him.

"If you google his name, his name comes up in all sorts of shady stuff, contraband and all sorts," Olonga says.

"But in any case, he helped me get to the UK and start a new life by giving me an air ticket."

adam.langenberg@news.com.au

