

November 2007

Dear Friends of Vhutshilo Mountain School:

The school is a buzz of energy and life. It far surpasses any expectations envisaged when it all began more than 5 years ago. Those of you who remember my mobile home with 12 children, me and Julia (who has been my right-hand for 18 years now, through bad times and good) would be stunned by this hive of activity, that is fast becoming a popular port of call for Tshikombani villagers in need of practical help or advice on any number of HIV or grant-related topics!

We have 51 little ones ranging from 15 months to 8 years being fetched, fed, clothed and loved, which makes my morning hugs quite a task as I battle to keep my balance against the onslaught of clinging arms and pushing bodies. We were compelled to admit 6 babies to the school after the 18 month old brother of one of our children had been admitted to the local hospital with chronic malnutrition. One of the women from the support group has become "Teacher Poppie" and she keeps them occupied while the rest of the children have their more formal lessons.

Our 2 teachers are doing an outstanding job in the education of our youngsters (on an embarrassingly low salary,) and Inder, our VSO volunteer (who has extended his 2 year contract to three years), is continuing his drive to involve local business people. Thanks to their ongoing generosity, we have received food parcels, blankets, clothes and watches (important for those on ARVs) which has been a mainstay with the ever increasing outreach activities of the programme.

The new stadium next door was completed in March, but due to a difference of opinion regarding the naming of it, the gates remain chained and we have not yet been able to use the beautiful green arena and sparkling pool... The kiosk is doing well even though we had anticipated the stadium would be open by now. Donations of clothing not suitable for the children or the women from the support group are sold, and on an average we make enough money to pay the salaries of our housekeeper/cook and cleaner/gardener.

The shelter in the school grounds is complete. At least now in the hot summer months some of the playground equipment can be moved and the children can play in the shade. This will also be used for traditional dancing lessons. Thanks to a generous donation we were able to purchase a very large "ngoma" (a drum carved from a huge tree trunk and covered with cured cow hide) and 2 smaller ones ("murumba") If nobody had noticed the school before, they certainly will when the deep resonant sound of these drums echos throughout the valley....

The garden is not being used to its full potential although it does supplement our meals and outreach parcels. We have appealed for help from the government agricultural department to check a soil sample and when this is done we will be able to improve production.

The computer lessons came to a halt for a while when our Peace Corp volunteer returned home, but have resumed with Inder and Khathutshelo (see insert) teaching our teachers and a couple of siblings.

Visitors to the school cannot believe that we have never had "proper" funding – i.e. grants from the State or the Lottery. It is, truly incredible what a committed group of kind people can achieve, with their individual sponsorships, recycled clothes and blankets knitted with love – most likely by arthritic fingers as well. And of course the ongoing support from the Church of Scotland! But it is time we had a "capital injection" from either the State, or one of South Africa's recognised funders, such as the Lottery. Having delivered our application to the latter 5 times (twice by hand – a 1000km round trip) they have now assured us that we *will* know the outcome by the end of October ... none of us are holding our breath. In the meantime, our hopes were raised at a full day workshop run by the government to show us how to apply for funds from the EU. Having assured us that the government cannot cope without partnering the non-profit sector, we completed and delivered a massive document, filled with optimism. 6 months later, we are still waiting to hear from the Dept of Social Development. It sounded so positive as they acknowledged that NGO's were actually "extended arms" of the Govt, but as yet no news. On the one hand it is helping us in the path to self-sustainability, but it would be great to get an injection of cash that we can use to increase salaries and purchase another vehicle. My personal car is still being used for most of the school transport and as it is over 20 years old, is costing a fortune in maintenance.

This letter was held back as I wanted to include a major event that has been in the pipe line for over a year, and which suddenly came together more successfully than anybody could have wished for. The first workshop for children on ARVs was held at Vhutshilo Mountain School. This great project to "Empower the Child" was funded by The Canadian Dev Ass, organised by TVEP, facilitated by CPC and assisted by Siloam Hospital. A pharmacist, social worker, Sister from the AIDS clinic and a representative from the Education Dept came together for this momentous

occasion. First the caregivers, mostly Magogos (Grandmothers) had a full day w/shop with breaks for meals and tea and biscuits. They were very happy to spend time with a small group talking about their problems and asking advice. Their monthly visits to the hospital for their young charges checkups and meds is too much of a rush with too few doctors and queues of people so no time for questions.

The 10 children ranging from 4 to 12 years (5 from VMS and the other 5 from our Outreach program) spent 3 hours (with lots of breaks for exercise and sustenance...) learning at first hand about the drugs and the dosages, good food to keep them strong, and social issues in dealing with the stigma (and their traditional Magogo's who are so often the caregiver) The most important lesson on taking the drugs at exactly the same time twice a day culminated in each child being given a watch (many little wrists raised many times to show off these newest acquisitions) and a bag of goodies for school. Thanks to TVEP for donating copies of "The Brenda Book" written by Hiltje Vink and translated into Tshivenda, so each child went home with a book that describes HIV as a dragon sleeping in their blood, that will only wake up if they forget to take their meds. Coupled with breakfast, tea, biscuits and a HUGE chicken and vegetable lunch I don't think getting them all to attend the next w/shop will be too much of a problem!! I was banned as I myself am a caregiver to my foster child, so I had to stoop to listening at the keyhole and trying to peep through the window! Luckily Thikhathali (our resident moviemaker) made a video to record this really tremendous breakthrough.

New Directions...

An incident involving an 8 year old boy called Thendo, gave us the next direction that the school will have to take.... The local hospital called for help as this child was battling with his ARV regime and his schoolwork was suffering. My heart came close to breaking as he arrived at the school to join our Grade 2 class. He was covered with the typical HIV rash and he weighed less than 10kgs... After 2 weeks he started looking better but then one Monday morning he did not come to school so I set off to find him. He was lying on a cement floor and his caregiver (an aunt with 7 of her own children and Thendo and his brother) said he had been vomiting since the Friday before. We rushed him to casualty and they immediately put him on a drip. His weight had dropped and he felt like a feather in my arms. His wrists were not much thicker than my thumbs and his facial bones jutted out. After 3 weeks in the hospital he was ready to be discharged but where was he to go....??

It is a major problem that when an HIV child is ready to be discharged there is often no place for them to go while social issues are being resolved at their homes. Furthermore, before going back on the drugs, they need to build their strength. Also, as in the case of young Thendo, an already poverty stricken household is further strapped by the addition of 2 more mouths to feed when a relative dies. Often the children are put into the local orphanage until these problems are resolved, but the care-givers there are not equipped to take on sick children with a rigid drug regimen to follow.

Luckily for Thendo a woman from the support group who lives behind the school and has a grandchild on ARVs offered to take him in. After many meetings with the social workers, doctors and relevant family members, I dropped him off at his new home where he has made a miraculous recovery. His cheery grin in the morning and his belly laughs as he plays with the other children are a constant reminder that all a child really needs is good food, a proper drug regime and loads and loads of love and affection. At his last monthly check-up the doctor looked at him like he was Lazarus back from the dead – he could not believe how well the child was. They had, he admitted, given up on Thendo because he had been in and out of hospital so often.

So, next year we hope to build a "halfway house" in the school grounds where children can stay while they adapt to what may be a life-long routine of taking meds, night and day. Thanks to an extremely generous donation from some Scottish friends, the plans are already being drawn!

The list of people who have helped sustain us over the past few years is too long to include, but please be aware that each and every one of you has truly "made a difference". Between you, you are sustaining a school that has become, quite literally, a life-saver to many.

Internet Blues...

E-mailing is still an absolute nightmare, but we have now bought a dongle (!!) that links us through a cell phone – we have been assured that the service will be better. Meanwhile, apologies to all who didn't receive replies or thank-you's, and also to those who received duplicates because Inder has tried sending from different locations. PLEASE acknowledge receipt when asked, otherwise we shall assume you didn't and keep sending!

With much love & thanks from
Suzi, the children, staff & volunteers of

New Staff Members:

Thikhathali, a young local lad fortunate enough to go to Scotland in February on a 2-week cam recorder course organised by the World Without Walls project. He came back full of praise for the hospitality of the Scottish folk that helped to make this a most memorable trip. The equipment he brought with him is being put to good use as he fulfils his commitment of a 24 month diary on specific facets of school activities (WWW.worldwithoutwalls.net) His “office” with all his hi-tech stuff looks incongruent in a corner of the library/computer lessons room. He travels to Louis Trichardt every Sunday to film a church service, has made a DVD for a birthday party besides filming various school activities. He earns some money and the school takes another step in the path to self-sustainability.

Khathutshelo shares another corner of the room. She came aboard to help with the fast growing outreach program. Her stipend is paid by the Canadians, through TVEP, and she is very busy organising my scrappy notes into a more readable database. She helps with accessing of the relevant grants and the distribution of the food parcels, as well as regularly visiting the children on ARVs to ensure they are adhering to the drug regime and to help the caregivers with any problems. She is also busy learning to drive so when we do eventually get a school vehicle she will be less dependent on local transport.