

## V h u t s h i l o M o u n t a i n S c h o o l

PO Box  
Sibasa  
Tshikombani, Limpopo  
NPO# 021-



737  
0970  
Fax: 015 963 1386  
664  
vhutshiloschool@yahoo.com

Tel: 015 973 0284  
Cell: 072 456 8929

### NEWS LETTER

November 2007 – October 2008

This “Bumper” edition of our annual??? newsletter will hopefully make up for the fact that I never managed to get it out sooner. A huge mix up with the previous edition (we thought we were clever and inserted photos!!) resulted in the majority of people not receiving it, so months later we were still sending it out to ensure everybody was up to date before attempting the next one. A large portion of blame is also attributed to my horrific time management, which like my computer skills (or lack thereof...), have much room for improvement.

Once again Vhutshilo Mountain School has had a year of sadness and joy, major achievements and frustrating setbacks, but through it all we have been anchored by the increasing health and happiness of the children in our care.

Our school of “life” had a reality check in October last year (2007) when Tshililo from the support group died due to non-compliance with her ARV regime. She went to Johannesburg to look for her husband to try and get maintenance for her 3 children. When she failed to make her monthly hospital check up, the doctor from the Siloam Aids Clinic phoned to ask if we knew her whereabouts as she would soon be running out of meds. When she eventually returned she was too sick to rally, and died in the hospital. Our usual lively happy school slumped into depression, and the women from the support group vacillated between feelings of failure that they had let her down, and anger that in her attempt to make a better life for her children, she had left them orphans. A group of us went to the village to offer condolences to the granny and to take mielie-meal and vegetables for the all night vigil, and the funeral the next day. A large tent had been erected next to the rondavels (sadly a sign of a death in the village and not a joyful graduation or birthday party as in the pre-pandemic days) and family and friends were gathering. Her youngest son, two year old Dembe, returned to school after the funeral, carrying the world on his small shoulders, and an old man's face under his back to front baseball cap.

Tshililos death coincided with the arrival of a group of visitors from France. Six school girls ranging in age from 12 to 15 years, from a Youth club in Atur, had started a project collecting teddy bears for children in Africa, heard about our school and asked if they could visit. Only one of the two women who accompanied them, and her daughter spoke English, so communication was a huge challenge. They fitted into all activities of school life, and when Mr. Makwarela, vice-chairman of the school board visited, he was amazed to hear the children singing catchy French songs. The visitors came laden with clothes, toys and games and spent time in the classroom teaching art and dance, and experiencing some of the heartbreaking experiences that our youngsters accept as “normal”. Our young visitors went home with a different perspective of life, and have since been involved in small projects like selling pancakes, giving donkey rides etc to raise funds, and to make people aware of the horrors of the AIDS pandemic. Viva La France !!

While they were here, another mother, Azwianewi, was rushed to hospital. Because she was suffering from TB she could not be put on the ARV drug regime, and was wasting away before our eyes. The women from the support group rallied around, taking special soft porridge to the hospital, making her walk short distances so she didn't get bed sores, and checking up on the 3 young children who were

left with the granny. This young mother pulled through, mainly I think by the sheer will and positive thought of the other women.

At the school year end a huge tent was erected in the grounds. This was for a happy occasion for a change, as 200 grannies, guardians and visitors came together to celebrate the graduation of 21 learners who were promoted to Grade 1, and to say farewell to 6 learners who had to leave to attend Grade 3 at their own local schools. They now join the Outreach Program so we can keep an eye on them and their families. The children kept us entertained with songs and dramas, culminating in a huge lunch. Our Xmas party was made more festive with parcels of sweets and toys collected by the Indian children in Louis Trichardt, and personalized hampers of NEW clothes (a real treat) and other goodies, once again kindly donated by Jessica and her sister Stacey from Johannesburg (a contact made through the South African magazine "You" that published a wish list for the school a few years ago).

The long school holidays are a constant worry as the children miss their two meals a day (one less hungry mouth for the granny at home to worry about.) Once again local businesses came to our aid, and Tiger Foods sent boxes of tinned and dry goods, so food parcels could be delivered twice to 23 families over the long December school holidays. The smiles and hugs from the children (and the grannies!!) when school started again in January, and the warm greetings from the community as I drove through to collect the children remind me of how lucky I am to have such a great job..???

2008 started badly with electricity cuts and the resulting computer problems, and more frequent breakdowns with my aging vehicle ("tshikorokoro push push") and more frustrating battles with government and traditional leaders to get the school registered with Dept of Education and the Dept. of Health and Welfare. This culminated in another trip to the Tshivase Territorial council with members of the community, civic and board members, where we had to pay for permission to occupy our site (a problem we thought had been resolved when we built the school !!) For a small NGO to pay for doing great community service this was a bitter pill to swallow (especially as none of the local chiefs have even bothered to visit and see what we are doing... and we are the ONLY community project ever to have been required to pay in this district!).

On a more positive note, a brick making machine was bought and 4 women from the support group started a small business in the school grounds. We also managed to find some temporary work for 6 women sewing fleecy slippers for a local factory. With a couple more women working in the veggie garden, the school began to look (and sound!!) like a very busy hive. A down side of these income generating projects was the realisation that the women needed training on basic book keeping and business practises, before embarking on any small enterprise project. Maybe in the new year we can source funds for a training course.

In April I acquired a new vehicle thanks to a very generous donation from Stichting Protestants Steunfonds in Holland. What an enormous relief not to worry in the early morning hours that the car will not start, or that I might put my feet into a puddle of water accumulated around the pedals during a night rainfall... No more dashing out at odd hours to cover the car and canopy in plastic sheeting, or taking my life in my hands as I got speedily towed through villages by less road worthy vehicles, scattering chickens and avoiding donkeys... I am not sure who felt more grateful, the women who usually ended up pushing, the children bouncing around in the back, my long suffering mechanic, or yours truly who on the final trip burst into tears when the door handle came off in my hand...

After months of fighting with the National Lottery regarding our 2005 application we received a letter in April to say we had been awarded R100,000 of the R380,000 that we had applied for. I was naïve enough to get very excited, only to read a few months later in their annual report that VMS had already been awarded the money before the end of their 2007 financial year!!! More frantic phone calls, and documents sent and resent, and we still wait.... even one of the opposition parties got involved, not just for VMS but using us as an example of Lotto in-competency. Camping on the Lottery steps with the full school contingency might be the only remaining option...

In April, a surprise visit from Oxfam Australia gave us a much needed boost. Although the school itself did not fall in their criteria, they thought they might be able to help with our Outreach work, including the development of a 6,000 m<sup>2</sup> vegetable plot we had started in a village called Tshimbidulu, but which was proceeding very slowly as we needed irrigation pipes to bring water from a mountain stream. The idea behind the garden is that not only would it feed the 4 families of the women working in it, but that the school would buy from them for our own consumption and outreach parcels, and the surplus would be sold at a roadside shop on the road in front of the school. This way the women can earn a small income, and we insure that fresh greens are always available.

Oxfam expressed interest in the quarterly workshops that we host for HIV+ children on all aspects of the strict drug regime. They asked us to send in a proposal, and in June Khathu, my Outreach coordinator, seconded to us by TVEP (Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Project,) and I, boarded a plane for Durban to meet the Oxfam “family,” to give a presentation, and to meet other NGO's doing similar work. Khathu's first flight was made more exciting by floods of rain which delayed our return home as another plane had skidded on the runway! Oxfam promised to inform us of the outcome within the following few months, and we came away feeling very confident. They are a great team of people, and it did much for our confidence to know that these well known international funders were interested in our projects.

On our return we were devastated to learn that Ondwele, at 18 months our youngest learner, had died of malnutrition and TB. His mother (Azwianewi,) who had rallied so well, had had a relapse and been too sick to look after him properly. She had also moved to another village so had been out of our care for a while. Once again the school was sunk in gloom (and recrimination), we all miss his presence in the kitchen where he preferred to spend most of his day, hitting the ankles of the kitchen staff with his walker, munching an apple or chunk of bread and keeping a watchful eye on the food preparations. To me personally it was a devastating blow that the death of our first learner was from circumstances that could have been avoided. The 2 young brothers moved in with the granny.

A Johannesburg School, I.R. Griffith, heard about us from a young scholar who had visited us, and thanks largely to her great efforts the children of her school collected 30 boxes of clothing for VMS. In June 2008 members of the Indian community in the nearby town of Louis Trichardt once again came to our aid with a donation of 110 blankets which the children proudly took home to their grannies/guardians. Together with a monthly donation of food items from Premjees Wholesalers, it is a huge relief in knowing that not only are the children well fed but that they also sleep warm at night.

In July a contingency of Scots (kilts and all ...) from Inverclyde in Scotland, descended on the school bearing gifts of trampolines, a Kidsmart computer from IBM, and loads of clothes and toys. Once again a festive holiday feeling hit the school for a few weeks as the 8 visitors joined in all activities and spoil the children (and staff!) rotten...

Learners from Moorfoot, Highholm, Clune Park and Slaemuir Primary Schools had been busy collecting and after a few extremely frustrating weeks dealing with import regulations and red tape, the school received over 500 kgs of clothing. The children, support group members and people in the O/R program all received huge bags of clothing, and the excess is being sold in the kiosk to help with outreach costs. Thanks to all those kind Scottish folk who helped bring an early Xmas to the communities assisted by the school. As a lot of uniforms had been donated, it was a particularly proud moment when our young Grade 1 and 2 scholars marched into class with their grey pants/skirts and crisp white shirts. With their grubby bare feet shoved under *real* school desks (bought through another kind donation) the children glowed with what I choose to interpret as an overwhelming desire to learn! A generous cash donation brought over by the visitors has been put in an investment account to be used at a later stage for a visitors cottage. Maybe our dream of having teachers to stay for a while to help, not only us, but also other local schools will one day be realised.

Thanks too, to Sheuchan Primary School who send over boxes of bright purple tops every year, our children are not only warm in the chilly winters, but stand out on the road as they wait to be picked up. Their school sent over pictures of a “Venda corner” in their grounds where animals carved from wood, and given Venda names, and pieces of traditional cloth (Munwenda) bring a small piece of Africa to Scotland.

In August we learned that Oxfam Oz had approved a R120,000 grant for VMS Outreach, and Khathu immediately became a permanent staff member. Now, or at least for a while, the Outreach program does not have to siphon money from the school for the vegetable gardens, ARV w/shops and transport costs that we pay for people to get to the hospital for their monthly checkups and ARV's.

Another highlight this past year was our first school trip. A bus was hired and children and staff embarked on an educational tour of the Limpopo Dairy in Louis Trichardt where the children were dumbfounded to see cows rotating on a conveyor belt whilst being milked by a computer. Then on to the Fire Station where the children were given a chance to handle the hose (luckily a hot day so nobody minded getting drenched as the high pressure hose proved more than a match for the group of youngsters clinging on desperately..) A picnic in the local park, and then back home with the smaller children fast asleep in their seats. For a few days after this trip, I was puzzled to see one of our youngest scholars dashing past my office door, backpack in hand and teacher in hot pursuit. Apparently, every time he saw a bus drive past the school, he thought it signified another trip so would run after it shouting “busse, busse”....!

A very positive sign that we were going in the right direction with community gardens was the unprecedented (unexpected !!) arrival of Pablo, a VSO volunteer from the Philippines who had been based at TVEP, until we realised he was a qualified agriculturist. He is now working with the women in the school and community garden, teaching them on the proper layouts, companion gardening and organic practices. He will also take over administration and finances from Inder Preet, who after a 3 year stint is leaving in February. It is with great sadness (and trepidation?? ) that we say farewell to this young volunteer who is returning to India, (despite my threats of tying him to his desk with a ball and chain... ,) to get married and run his family business. We wish him success and happiness. He will be sorely missed by us all, and I am not sure what I am going to do without my ever calm, pleasant and willing right hand..

With sadness we mourned the demise of Mrs. Harlow from Stowmarket in England who was our first sponsor when the school opened in 2002. The child she sponsored, Vhuhwavo, became my foster child, and Mrs Harlow paid for her ARV's before the government started rolling the drugs out free of charge. Thanks to this early start my child is healthy and strong, and at the age of 9, is probably the youngest “ambassador” playing an important role in our children's ARV workshops. She graduated to a local Primary school this year where her openness re her HIV status has done much to dispel the myths and stigma surrounding this horrific disease.. We were grateful to receive a generous donation from Mrs. Harlow's estate which will go towards our building fund.

With the huge increases in fuel, basic foodstuffs and paraffin (used by most local folk as a means to cook, the alternative being our dwindling forests,) the running costs at the school shot up. With 55 children, 6 permanent staff, 3 support group women, 2 volunteers, a huge transport bill with 4 drivers bringing the children in, and an expanding O/R program, the future looked a little bleak... Scary, too, to have so many people reliant on us and your goodwill.. The average monthly expenses of the school are R40,000 which is an awesome amount of money considering it all comes from individual sponsors and donations. Small wonder I sometimes have sleepless nights worrying about our dependency on the continuing goodwill of our friends and sponsors.

With all the economic and political upheavals of the last 12 months, our school of life continues to breathe fresh hope and positive vibes. We now have a website kindly organised by friends in the States. ([www.hopeforlimpopo.org](http://www.hopeforlimpopo.org)) The Churchills who helped so much to keep the school running in

the early days, have been fighting their own personal battle as Vaughn was diagnosed with lung cancer nearly 5 years ago. That they could still think about our children throughout this battle is indicative of the type of people they are..

I apologize for mail not received or answered, and also if, inadvertently, I have omitted to thank somebody specifically. Any donation, small or large, cash, clothing, toys or food is always received with gratitude, and often disbelief ?? that so many people from so many different places continue to dig deep in their pockets... The doors of VMS are always open to visitors who want to see first hand what you have helped to achieve....

Sincerely,

Sue Anne Cook, Principal  
Vhutshilo Mountian School