

NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2006

Another year has whizzed by, and once again we look back and see our achievements (or lack thereof, but not through want of trying...). The trees are a little taller and broader (as are the children, especially those that have been with us for a few years) and the school is becoming more "at once" with the surrounding village, not only as a physical entity, but as an integral part of community life.

Six of our learners have graduated to Grade 2, so a new teacher, Mrs. Muthivhi, has been appointed. She has an interest in sports so will be an asset in taking care of the more physical side of the education curriculum. Space will be a problem for a while but I am confident we will be able to raise funds to build the much-needed classroom. In Venda culture much emphasis is placed on the transition from Grade R to Grade 1. For our graduation ceremony we hired a tent and for the first time the children put on a drama and sang and danced. What a wonderful chaotic morning as the youngsters went through their routines with much prompting and pushing. The music system broke down often, and the heat was intense. Predictably, the entire production had to grind to a halt when our smallest learner had to dash to the loo in the middle of his part; the cast had to freeze until he returned, and then carried on as if there had been no interruption. The audience was seen to wipe their eyes repeatedly as they roared with laughter at Vhutshilo's first stage production.

We were surprised and privileged to have as our guest speaker the ANC councillor for our area, who had ducked a far more posh function to be with us. Her obvious enjoyment of the children's antics will, I hope, bring her back to visit us soon. She has promised to work closely with us on our various projects. This is a godsend as so many of our problems stem from the lack of government services at grassroots level. I hope she won't regret her invitation to call her at any time!

Soccer mania hit Tshikombani! The 63 boxes of soccer strips donated by the Scottish contingency and delivered through the kindness of British Airways sold like a bomb, and funded the building of a kiosk. This is now open, and two days a week the locals come to view the clothes, and catch up on the latest gossip. When the stadium opens next year we will start to sell chips, cold drinks and takeaway foods. We want to start soccer clinics for the youngsters and swimming lessons in the beautiful new pool. A large number of children drown in dams and rivers over the hot summer months, so perhaps we can at least help a few to be more adept in this still foreign environment. Any swimming coaches interested in spending a summer in Venda??!! More of that later....

Our support group for PLWA's (People Living with AIDS) have had lessons in basic bead work and will make necklaces and bracelets in the local soccer team colors to sell from the kiosk. The women (unfortunately, most men would rather die in denial than accept their status and deal with it) are a fine illustration of the benefits of ARV's, good nutrition and the support of other women with similar problems. They are healthy and strong, and more importantly their mindset is positive. My heart swells when I hear them in the garden, laughing and chatting. They have a wonderful sense of humour – the latest is that nobody in the group is allowed to die, because "Suzi has no black clothes for a funeral.!

The community library has taken longer than expected to be functional as we have had a problem getting donated books transported up to Venda. Never-the-less, three people have benefited so far from the computer literacy classes: our teacher Florence, a high school student and a caregiver. We are trying to get more updated computers donated, and the relevant programs so we can start teaching the older learners.

Although the vegetable garden has produced a fair amount for school and outreach consumption, it has not reached its full potential as the soil is poor, manure has to be transported in, and the irrigation system must be improved. A project that has been shelved is the medicinal herb garden. Hopefully this "AIDS Eden" can be started next year and PLWA's will be able to get traditional plants and herbs to alleviate rashes, diarrhea, etc. and to strengthen the immune system.

Our Outreach program has grown steadily, and, thanks to the two volunteers who take care of much of the routine admin work (yay!), I am able to spend more time in the community. As we become better known, more and more people are asking for help, but some are too frail, afraid or poor to get to the school. The

Governments social responsibility program is wonderful in theory, with a commitment to housing, food parcels, grants and the roll out of free ARV's – but the reality is very different in rural areas. Folk in our community continue to survive well below the breadline, and a vast number are affected in some way or other by the AIDS pandemic.

Tow care-givers from different areas around the school are coming to me constantly with horror stories from the surrounding villages. I have attached some of these case histories separately, as this letter is becoming very long.

Inder, our VSO volunteer, has made great strides in getting the local Indian businessmen to help us. They supply a large portion of the food and second hand clothes for the outreach parcels. Some of the women have formed a group and want to visit the school and teach the support group sewing machine skills. A local hotel put on a Christmas spread for us and some children from the Outreach programme, and a popular magazine published a wish list and some kind soul sent outfits of clothing for each child.. these contributions are particularly reassuring as we seem to get so much help from overseas, and it is time local businesses acknowledge their social responsibilities.

The school is always busy with locals coming to buy clothes, the support group working in the garden, people coming for advice and help, and of course the constant background noise of the children. The one thing visitors all agree on is that it is a happy school. To quote a board member "It is a place to visit when you want a "feel good day."

After the classroom, our next big project is to build a traditional dwelling (with modern plumbing!) on the hill above the school. The plan is to use it for visitors, volunteers and the like, and perhaps to lease it to tourists now and again to bring in some revenue. We are hoping to persuade people to spend a few months with us, to generally enrich our children's lives by coaching them in various sports, or teaching them to dance (ballroom or ballet!), swim, paint and so forth. In return, the children will teach the visitor how to sing, perform traditional dances and fall in love with Africa! We would love to hear your ideas on this, and to hear from interested parties.

It is hard to believe that one small school is doing so much, and it's all thanks to you. IN some way or other, you have helped to take away the fear from an old mans eyes, deliver a food parcel to a family who have been living off maize meal for months, save a child's life by monitoring his drug regime,, access a monthly grant for a granny that suddenly has 5 extra mouths to feed when her daughter dies. The list is growing and thanks to your ongoing charity, we have never had to turn anybody away. May God be with you.

All the best,

Sue Anne Cook
Principal