

KING GEORGE VI CENTRE

Rehabilitation & Learning Centre for Physically Disabled & Hearing Impaired Children
Incorporating

Amandla Residential Village

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Annual Report 2002

This year has brought such a mix of good and bad things that I decided to try and reflect this in our annual report. As long as we can continue to see the products of our work, we can continue to face the problems. KGVI has a very special atmosphere and despite all that is going on in the country around us the children have managed to keep us on track.

Just recently we held our final combined meeting of the term when we award prizes for the best independent living students. It was a cheerful meeting with lots of good advice being handed out by the staff at the same time as many comments handed right back by the children. It was wonderful to hear those children who started out the year shy and withdrawn, joking and teasing in front of everyone. Our main prize winner was a boy who came to us only in Form 1 as he had been sitting at home with no schooling for a couple of years. In one year he has not only become an expert at independent living but has also helped and inspired some of the lazy ones in his house.

While we can still help our children develop and find this sort of confidence we have to find a way to continue. It seems that a speciality of KGVI is to find the hidden talent of each child and to then give them the confidence to develop this. This often means that we ourselves have to suddenly find new knowledge or a specialist to help. This year we have two budding hairstylists, several pianists, two mbira players, several actors, a couple of poets and from a very quiet girl came an unexpected talent for song writing.

On the sad side, we have to report that we lost two children this year. Zakeyu who many will recognise from previous reports came back at the beginning of the third term but very quickly succumbed to the muscular dystrophy which had so weakened him throughout the year. He was so brave and cheerful at the end that many people thought he was getting better. Another one of our muscular dystrophy students who left KGVI two years ago came for the forum in August and sadly died immediately afterwards. Although our children and staff are used to young people dying it is still a shattering event especially for the other children with the same condition. Each person who dies leaves a hole in the whole construction of the KGVI family.

The care and loving that our sick children receive from our nursing staff has continued over the year. Our head nurse has a miraculous ability to seek out the best medical treatment at the hospital as well as to source necessary drugs even during a 6 month old pharmaceutical strike. She has also successfully taken on the task of persuading the various authorities that we should have a regular supply of our staple maize meal for the children. This she obtains by pleading, subterfuge, charm and sheer obstinacy. Anyone who has met the sweet Mrs Mguni cannot believe the stubborn core that makes sure 'her' children get the very best possible care.

An added problem facing the Centre, and indeed many organisations in Zimbabwe, is staff leaving the country. Over the next few months we will have to look at replacing five members of staff and finding the right people for the job will not be an easy task. These are people who have had years of training and experience but sadly anyone who is able to is leaving. The general morale of everyone in Zimbabwe is very low and some staff have to deal with terrible problems. Just this last term one houseparent lost her husband and her sister within a matter of weeks. Added to this is the economic hardship and although we are trying to increase staff salaries this in turn places a heavy burden on our own financial position. With an unofficial inflation rate of 300% how can any of us hope to keep up.

The school has also lost good staff over the year with teachers leaving suddenly without any notice to take up jobs in England and more planning to leave at the end of the year. Our headmistress of many years left for Australia in the middle of the year but the new head seems to have adequately filled the gap. She is full of new ideas to increase productivity from both teachers and children. This fits in well with comments that came from the school leavers forum that we didn't work our students hard enough at KGV school! Also following on from the forum we are looking into the possibility of employing a sign language interpreter to work with our deaf classes next year.

It is of course not only the staff who face devastating personal problems. With poor nutrition and medical care the rate of AIDS death is increasing alarmingly. We now have ten orphans at the centre. Luckily they all have family members or friends who are prepared to help them. How long this will continue when families are faced with such hardships we are not sure. It is a sad fact that the whole infrastructure of the extended family, which has always been a safeguard in the past, is now breaking down. This week one of our girls was faced with our children's worst fears, she was not picked up for the holidays. We have had no word from her parents but suspect that they have no money to pay for the bus fare to come to Bulawayo to collect their daughter. They are a very rural family whose home was destroyed by the cyclone that hit this area in 2000. Since then there has been little rain and thus little harvest for peasant farmers. This year looks like it will be another drought which will spell certain disaster for the families of most of our children.

Counselling is an ongoing activity with some new problems coming to light, like the girl who stole the phone key and proceeded to run up huge phone bills for the Centre while she phoned her many boyfriends! Then there is the girl who became disabled following a road accident and is still struggling to come to terms with her lack of ability in areas where before she had excelled. There are always children on the counselling waiting list and next year we are hoping to find funding to send 4 staff members on a professional counselling course. The staff will include one physically disabled lady and a hearing impaired man, thus we hope to cater for everyone!

We had a very hard time going through all the children on the waiting list for 2003 as we had to select only 12 children from a list of nearly 30! Because we have so many little ones needing new places and many children in Sinqobile who are not yet ready to move up to the older houses, we have decided to start another interim house where our present little ones will be able to start learning about independent living but still have time for play. Unfortunately this will mean taking on two new members of staff which will mean more draws on our finances. However the alternative was to take no new juniors into the Houses and this would have been the first step to cutting down and giving up!

What a relief that we have managed to keep the children fed throughout the term. They may have had to eat yellow maize meal and green vegetables for many meals but at least we have been able to maintain a fairly balanced diet, which is more than can be said for many children in Zimbabwe. Our own gardens have kept the children in vegetables and with donations we have been able to give them a little meat and occasionally even some fruit! Our biggest problem this term has been bread, which is becoming a very rare commodity. We have a special arrangement for a few loaves each week from a local shop, but more often than not they have not had the flour to make any bread anyway. A further problem is that we never know whether the bread will cost Z\$60 or \$180 a loaf as the price fluctuates from day to day depending on what policy is upmost in people's minds! Budgetting has become virtually impossible for the houses and they now have no money spare for anything but the most basic provisions.

We are very proud of the fact that we now employ three of our own school leavers, two in the office and one in the kitchen. During the term our secretary left and we have replaced her with one of our school leavers who has just completed a secretarial course. All are doing a really competent job and have quickly become indispensable. In fact Precious, who was taken on as

a short term contract supported by a organisation from Finland, worked so well that we found we couldn't manage without her and she is the one who is almost permanently occupied in making contacts, following up, pleading and finally (thank goodness) coming up with whatever the latest food item in short supply.

Our apprenticeship programme went well this year with one school leaver trained in maintenance and repair work and one in catering skills. Portia from the kitchen now has a temporary job with a local catering firm which we hope will turn into a full time job. Zenzo from the maintenance section has a possible offer of a job next year if the rains come and there is work at the market garden in question. Next year we hope to take on another two or three apprentices. Several of our present school leavers will be coming back for the business studies course which gives them basic secretarial and computer skills. One of our independent living houses has now been turned into a halfway house for school leavers. Next year it will be shared by five school leavers who will be living fully independently.

Another area where we are achieving new success is in outreach. Over the year our therapy staff have run several workshops with various organisations helping parents of disabled children understand how they can help their children at home. The most successful of these was a workshop on communication run in conjunction with the Parents of Handicapped Children's Association where over 30 parents attended. The houseparents have also been busy with outreach and were joined by the therapy staff to run two parents workshops over the year. Unfortunately we never get as many parents as we invite and it is always the parents we really want to reach who stay away. However those parents who do attend always go away with an entirely new idea of the abilities of their children. Both houseparents and therapy staff have themselves undergone various workshops over the year including wheelchair maintenance, medical care for urostomy patients, counselling, first aid, understanding disabilities and more.

Now to look at another down side of the year. The centre buildings are now over fifty years old and despite our hard working maintenance man, we found several vital systems in need of replacement. We were having to deal with huge water bills and when we investigated we found our external piping system had deteriorated to the extent that many pipes broke into rusty crumbs at a touch. We therefore had to replace the entire system which took several months and many thousands of dollars. No sooner had we completed this than we had to look at roof gutters in much the same state of rusty collapse. We are still in the process of trying to replace the worst and repair the rest.

We are fortunate to have been able to look at a new project as well as simply carrying out maintenance. We are in the process of developing an orchard which will be watered from the Centre and school's waste water. This has long been a dream of ours to be able to produce our own fruit while at the same time to deal with the never-ending problem of our sewage waste. A huge amount of designing, planning, digging and plumbing has resulted in what looks like will be a very efficient system.

On the positive side our arts programme was expanded this term with the provision of marimba, mbira and piano lessons. Most of our seniors are now involved in producing music in some way, whether it be with an instrument or just with their voices. In November we held our Music Mix concert with KGVII choirs plus a few invited performers. This was a great success with our by now popular singing group much in demand. These 4 talented performers call themselves *Inkonjane* which is a bird that flies around just before rain storms bringing news of rain to come – thus spreading hope for the ever needed rain – a good omen.

The fame and popularity of *Inkonjane* spreads by the day. At the end of November they won a talent competition hosted by Amakhosi Theatre. In addition they have performed at weddings and church gatherings all over Bulawayo. Their first CD and cassette (called *Never*) was released at the end of year school prize giving concert. It is well worth listening to and if anyone wants to purchase a copy please let me know and we can arrange payments

(£5)and delivery from England. It is our dream to raise the funds to get two of the group over to England some time next year to improve and polish up on their natural skills.

Our Independence & Integration Forum held at the end of August was another success and among other things has led to the formation of the KGVI Old Scholars Association. The word that comes to mind when thinking of the forum is “communication”. We had over 60 participants and of this number over half were deaf. We used an interpreter for sign language and everything discussed was then signed and questions or ideas were translated back.

To add to this was the difficulty of people who had so much to contribute but who have speech impairments. All in all it was rather a slow process but the magic was that despite this we really did ‘communicate’. Interestingly enough the forum became very much about the deaf. As we progressed it became clear that we have been so busy concentrating on those with the obvious disabilities, those with whom we can easily communicate, that the other side of our student population has been neglected. Disability is a broad term and it is not possible to look at the problems of a person with a mobility disability in the same light as someone who cannot hear. We have been tasked with finding ways to help our deaf children learn more at school and do less in the Houses. Worries about discrimination, career guidance, the future and employment opportunities are matters that concerned everyone there. A full copy of the report is available.

I hope this report has shown just how we swing from high to low! One of the most rewarding things to report is the wonderful support we have had from you, our friends. Most of the big donor organisations have abandoned Zimbabwe but we have managed to keep going on the support of small organisations, church groups and friends. Our individual child sponsorship programme brings in some valuable funding for running expenses and so many people have helped us with donations large and small either for projects or just to enable us to meet our monthly bills. We now have two overseas charities in support of our work, run by more friends:

in the Netherlands –Jabulani Kids Zimbabwe
in England – Amandla Trust

Both trusts operate bank accounts and details are available on request.

We look to the next year with much trepidation and many questions. We hope that we will be able to continue operation but our biggest fear is very basic - we simply may not be able to source sufficient food for the 91 expected boarders!

In the meantime thank you very much for all your support. It really helps our morale to know there are so many people from all over the world who care about our future.

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