

KING GEORGE VI CENTRE

Email: kg6@ecoweb.co.zw

August 2004

Inez Hussey

I thought for this report I could try and tell the story of the latest term through several of the children. As usual some of the news is positive and some of it very depressing. Sometimes this term we have felt overwhelmed with the problems and the disappointments. I apologise for the length of this report but when I start writing about the children there seems to be so much to say!

Prices of everything continue to rise and at the end of this term we found ourselves without any stocks left for the next term. Our newspapers keep reporting that inflation is under control but we continue to see prices increased dramatically every time we have to re-order an item. We are very fortunate in that every time we find ourselves wondering how to pay for the next load of supplies miraculously someone comes to our rescue, as David always says – someone up there is looking out for our children! So once again, thankfully we are able to buy most of the food and cleaning materials needed for next term. Our boarding fees continue to be approximately one third of the real costs of keeping a child at KGVI. If we increase the fees to 3 million a term, which would be closer to the real figure, we estimate that only two of our parents would be able to pay, and we would have to find bursaries for the rest! Our choice, therefore, is to charge an amount which at least 40% of our families can pay and which will at least cover some of our costs. A few years ago the number of children attending school in Zimbabwe was as high as 97%, the latest statistic puts the number as low as 65%. If we cannot continue to support our children at KGVI they will certainly not be sent to school. The disabled child would be the first to be left at home when deciding which of your children were the best to educate.

Despite ever-increasing costs we were proud when our volunteer doctor told us that we were obviously feeding the children a healthy diet as they had kept so healthy through the winter term. Shortly following this we had a number of children coming down with flu but most worrying of all were the three muscular dystrophy children who became seriously ill with chest infections. Sonia in particular really worried us for a few days but with the excellent care given by our nursing staff she finally improved.

Sadly the effect of these three children being so ill was not good on the other senior students who became very depressed. What is the point of educating us when we just get sick and when there are no jobs for us anyway were just two of the remarks overheard. We quickly organised a panel of past KGVI pupils to come and talk to all the seniors. John – studying for his Masters in Computer Science; Lizanani – having completed a Business degree is now studying for his Masters; Courage – secretary at the Muscular Dystrophy Association, having studied for her A levels on her own; Soneni – working in a local business while studying for a media degree; Linet – with her own needlework and hairdressing business, Cleverance – working for a local company and about to get married. Their combined advice and experience was impressive and we hope the children really listened. However realistically we have to acknowledge that increasing poverty and disappearing family members mean that the opportunities these earlier school leavers had are just not there for the present students. We all have to believe that there will be something for our present seniors to do once they leave KGVI but the prospects are not good. This whole situation has set me wondering what happens to similar children in Europe and America – any comments?

Another school leaver who has succeeded is Mkhumi Valela. Despite his very severe cerebral palsy he persuaded a local government school to take him in for his A levels. He went to school every day with an assistant and at the end of two years he passed all three of his subjects. An added bonus was that Mkhumi helped his assistant by coaching him in O level subjects, which he too later passed. Mkhumi's father was so proud and the next plans were for Mkhumi to study further through a correspondence university. Sadly just after he came to visit us to give us the news about his son, Mr Valela died - he had not been strong since he was beaten up by thieves and so badly disfigured that he had to resign from his job as a headmaster. If only we had more parents as supportive as the Valelas

and more students as determined as Mkhumi - it is obvious that the one goes such a long way to produce the other!

One of our leavers this year will be Ivy. Not as bright or as hard working as Tinaye and Sonia (now at Girls College), she is unlikely to pass all of her 5 O levels and then what will she do? She has shown a great interest and aptitude for teaching others about AIDS. She and 5 other KGVI students attended a course on AIDS awareness through peer education. They were then given 3 days of school time to teach their fellow students. I looked in on some of these sessions, including the ones for the deaf and was very impressed with the frank and sensible way the children were handling the subject.

Sonia and Tinaye are doing very well at their A level school and both of them will receive awards at the annual prize giving. Meanwhile Tinaye and one of our deaf students were offered a trip to the Victoria Falls by our latest Dutch volunteer, Charles. They had a magical trip and now want to send all the children!! Charles has been here for the term helping out everywhere and anywhere and making friends with everyone. We are hoping that he and his cousin will come up with a new video of life at KGVI. We also had two other volunteers this term, Sanna, helping with art lessons and the murals for the art competition between the houses and Sabine spending time with the children during their leisure time. Sabine is also helping out with the students who are here over the holidays. We all so much value the time given by volunteers and the breath of fresh air they bring.

Tinaye is another one of our orphans. Her father was a headmaster and one of the first parents to come on one of our training workshops. I remember him being so impressed with what the children had achieved, he was even reduced to tears at the sight of Thando cutting vegetables with a knife held in her mouth. Sadly not that long afterwards he died, but knowing the problems Tinaye would face, he left a fund to assist her in the future. This fund became the subject of a big quarrel between Tinaye's brother and uncle with the end result that Tinaye is the only one not to benefit from it! Appeals to the family to help with school fees, boarding fees, wages for the full time assistant she shares with Sonia, exam fees and even pocket money, are all ignored. This holiday Tinaye decided not to go home at all but to stay and put in some extra study time at KGVI. She has also been offered some secretarial work by another organisation, which will restore her pride to a small extent as she will be able to earn the money to pay her assistant, at least for a month or two.

For the other children, life continues with its ups and downs. There is Ephraim, rescued a couple of years back from life in a hospital ward, who is now proudly walking. There is Laiza who was ill at the beginning of term and is still depressed and so thin. There is Emmanuel who returned from the holidays with horrendous pressure sores once again despite our visits to his mother to try and motivate her to look after him. His mother claims that she is so busy trying to earn a living that she doesn't have time to look after her son! Then there is the sad story of Buhle, who some of you may remember, had such a bad experience when she broke her leg and spent so much time in hospital. Just before school closed she was so excited about the prospect of going home that she was bouncing on her bed and suddenly her very brittle leg broke again. She was whisked off to hospital and now has to spend the whole holiday there and will only see her mother when she can afford the bus fare to come and visit. Life really isn't fair for so many of our children.

Not all our children are so keen to go home and this term we have had a flood of them pleading to be allowed to stay here during the holidays. Luckmore nearly drove us all mad with his pleas to be allowed to stay and work on his garden. When he is at KGVI he is useful and productive while when he is at home he is seen as a nuisance and a burden. Then there is Ellen, one of our deaf girls, who is in the sad position of being the first one of our students not to be collected at the end of term. We have heard nothing from the family and have not yet managed to get hold of them. In the meantime Ellen seems to be more than happy to spend her holidays helping out with the students who are spending the next four weeks at KGVI studying.

This term several of our boys were involved in some quite serious wheelchair basketball. Elecium was chosen as the team captain because he was the best goal scorer. The first disappointment was when the medical staff realised that Elecium was even playing basketball and they insisted he stop immediately. Elecium has haemophilia and has already permanently damaged one leg, we just cannot risk him doing the same to an arm. He was obviously bitterly disappointed but agreed to be the non-

playing captain when the team was invited to take part in the national youth games in Masvingo. Many plans were made and the boys were to stay on at KGVI for a week in the holidays practising and then were to leave on a camp preceding the actual games. A day before this was all to start we were told that wheelchair basketball had been cancelled from the games! The look on the boys' faces when we had to pass on this news was heartbreaking. We managed to get hold of the national organiser but couldn't persuade him to reinstate the event – he claimed there were not enough teams to warrant it. We have offered to arrange a camp at Masiye for the boys later in the year, but it is just not the same. It wasn't just the fun of the whole project, it was the idea of competing with other youth on equal terms.

Our public performance for this term was a musical evening held at the Art Gallery. KGVI students joined other piano players from Bulawayo and performed to a full audience. Piano music may not have been written to be played with the same energy as a traditional marimba, but it does make for an enthusiastic performance. Thakazalela and Darlington had mastered basic piano playing over the term and their performance quickly won the hearts of the audience and had feet tapping. Thakazalela is one of our orphans and we have to pay his extended family train fares to bring him back to school each term or they might just keep him at home to be a goatherd. Darlington is one of our weekly boarders who, despite his disabilities, is fetched by his father each week on a bicycle. Darlington has just won a regional award for success in independent living. Farai, another of our orphans played a more sophisticated piece, which left everyone wondering how on earth he managed to manipulate the piano keys with such deformed hands.

Early in the term we sent a group of senior deaf children to Masiye Camp in the Matopos. This time we decided to send only deaf children so that they could understand that we do value them and that they don't always have to be looking out for their wheelchair bound colleagues. They had a wonderful time on a very physical camp, which included helping each other through a rope course. Problems with communication became obvious when children were literally dropped for the simple reason that you cannot hang on to a rope and use sign language at the same time! For those of you who can receive photos I will try and send a photo of their canoe experiences.

We do still have a couple of projects to keep us busy. We have held a number of organic gardening courses with a German organisation. The courses have included all the gardeners, two houseparents, some school leavers and Luckmore and Castor from school. As a result the gardens are looking beautiful (and productive) and Castor who has always been a very withdrawn, depressed boy has started planting a variety of fruit trees under the guidance of our head gardener. Also, following Beit Trust's generous doubling of our grant we have been able to buy all the materials for our music room. Through the hard work of our maintenance man we shopped around, wheedled, pleaded and begged and managed to get most items at the same price as we were quoted 3 months ago – a miracle believe you me! We are now desperate to get on and start building but have to wait for the city council to pass the building plans and as the team who do this only work two days a week this may take some time!

I have saved the good news for last - Pharis, Fibion and Prudence have been invited to Switzerland for 3 months to work with a mentally disabled theatre group there. They are to help them produce an African theme play with their main responsibility being the music and songs. In addition the organisers in Switzerland are going to arrange some fund raising concerts where just the 3 of them will perform. This will happen from November to January and once they have worked with the group they will be touring all over Switzerland. What excitement and what a lot of hard work. They have already written 3 songs and are hard at work on the rest and on practising for their own concerts. As if this was not enough, there is more excitement for Pharis. Having tried for so long to find some way to help this talented young man, his opportunities all came at the same time. He has just been accepted at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (the college was started by Paul McCartney of Beatles fame) to do a one year's diploma in Popular Music and Sound Technology. We had to ask the college to postpone his place for a year to give us time to try and raise the fees but also so that Pharis could go to Switzerland. This way he will be able to raise some of his own fees. Pharis was so excited when the news came through and is determined to come back to Zimbabwe at the end of it and continue his project to open up arts opportunities to the disabled. He and a friend from the local Bahai church have even registered an organisation to begin work on this. Even with this project we had to fight every

step of the way to get Prudence's father to agree to help her obtain her passport. We are very grateful to both the Swiss and Zimbabwean teams that they are including Prudence and that they can overlook her disability to appreciate how much her voice will benefit the production.

For the time being we must all find the determination, the strength and the optimism to continue. Sadly our hopes and pleas must be for bread, toilet rolls, books and disinfectant while our dreams are of jobs, a radio station, an arts college and purpose designed halfway housing. Once again we thank you all for giving us so much financial support and encouragement to keep on. Please pray that both children and staff can continue to motivate each other and that the time will come when we can plan and not merely survive!