

KING GEORGE VI CENTRE

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This has been a good term, I cannot believe that I am saying that! The situation in Zimbabwe is anything but positive but somehow here at KGVI we seem to have escaped the general doom and gloom. I think this is best expressed by a quote in a poetry book written by one of our school leavers. Edmore Masendeke is now at the University of Zimbabwe doing a business degree and in his spare time he has produced a poetry book called "*Poems for Life*". His dedication runs: *I dedicate this book to the children of King George VI School whose most precious gift is the lives they enjoy despite the hardships they go through every day of their lives.* To those people who are always asking – of course our children are not happy all the time but while they are here they make the most of their time. But of course neither their disabilities nor their problems go away.

We have a group of 15 girls who come for weekly counselling sessions, 7 of them are orphans the rest are girls who are having problems with their families. They are a very keen group who have called themselves *Ntombizodwa* which means girls only. They called me into one of their meetings recently and asked if they could make some visits to orphanages and see how they manage. They also want to learn some craftwork so they can help us at KGVI to support them!

Two members of this group both have difficult stories to tell. Preferment spent the holiday in her uncle's one room being cared for by her father, recently released from jail for rape! We have spent this term trying to sort through all the family dynamics and find somewhere better for her to stay next holiday. We have done a lot of soul searching this term about our orphans. We don't want to take them away from their families as they will need that contact when they leave KGVI, on the other hand sending them home to extended family in the holidays often puts them at risk of neglect or worse. Our compromise is to make frequent visits to the family and try to help them support their adopted child. What has become very clear is that it is all down to economics. A family who suddenly has to take in orphans does so willingly as first and then as finances become tight the trouble starts. We have two families where some of the children have simply been evicted and sent to the rural areas or on to the streets. One of our little girls was really worried about her brother who was rejected by the aunt who was supposed to be caring for them. We have tried to involve social services in Harare but basically there are just so many problems like these that they can't (or wont) do anything. Chipu is another of our orphans who came to us from hospital at the beginning of the term. She has had to have major surgery and has no legs and terrible pressure sores. There are also rumours of abuse in her past. She came in a very quiet subdued child who cried a lot. The end of the term reveals a confident, happy child taking charge in her independent living house and even trying to sort out some of the squabbles between her housemates.

We began the term with a team building workshop for the houseparents and a leadership course for heads of department. Both events went very well and helped with the determination to do a good job we have observed in almost all centre staff. The houseparents did some team building activities out at Masiye Camp including having to help each other climb over a 6 metre narrow wooden wall. Even the larger ladies were determined to have a try and nothing daunted those already up on the top did their best to pull them up. The organisation and teamwork demonstrated by all the houseparents was very impressive.

It is not possible to send news from Zimbabwe without mentioning finances so please read through this bad paragraph and then on to the positive developments. Incredible though it seems, prices continue to rise by the day. At the end of last term we were spending Z\$480 million per month and now 4 months later we are looking at over a billion dollars a month. I cannot believe that we are now dealing in billions – it used to be a mythical figure one could only try and imagine! Our cold room recently broke down and we were quoted 40 million for

repairs, the very next day they told us it would actually cost 79 million. This we refused and suddenly they came back to the 40 million and told us they would kindly 'donate' the other 39! We buy our petrol from one of our staff members. The official pump price for fuel is Z\$23,000 per litre the real cost (and the only way to buy fuel anyway) is \$200,000 per litre but this price goes up every week. Of course we have had to review staff salaries twice this term to try and ensure our staff can buy the bare necessities. Anything extra like school fees, medical expenses, transport home has to come as a loan. The usual shortages also continue to plague us – mealie meal, sugar, flour and coal. We have been fortunate in obtaining mealie meal but many people in the country have just not managed to get a regular supply. Precious has learnt to be determined and to make sure she gets the goods no matter how rude people are to her. Unfortunately available funds are also affected by foreign currency rates. Having floated the Zim dollar against the US, they have now changed their minds and as a result the official rate and the blackmarket rate are parting ways again – a British Pound can now be worth Z\$178,000 or Z\$350,000!

All schools in Zimbabwe are struggling to purchase books, cleaning materials and all the basics necessary to keep a school going. We have been very fortunate to get some funding which was specifically for textbooks. We found that spending Z\$400,000,000 on textbooks was not very hard! The school started the term with an influx of non disabled students who came to KGVI because their parents could not afford the school fees at their previous schools. This went along with our policy of integration *into* KGVI and seems to be working well. We were a little bit worried about the disabled children being overlooked but they have the confidence here at KGVI not to let that happen. You only have to look at one of the little girls who always has her flock of non disabled girls surrounding her wheelchair, fighting over who will push her. One of our past students also at university, spent a couple of weeks with us and wrote a paper on the importance of integration...*"as they engage in their day to day activities, assisting and being assisted, playing and socialising together able bodied children get to discover that the disabled child is not a useless item requiring assistance all the time. Together they learn to live together, complementing each other's efforts where one falls short. Attitudes change firstly among children themselves and eventually over to parents and right into the community"*

Our teaching staff were augmented this term by two of our past students, Sonia who is teaching one of the nursery classes and Prudence who is running the music programme. We also have one of our JKZ volunteers helping out with the teaching which has been a very successful experiment. Then our senior vocational class has been enjoying a very lively term with Kezz, our Australian volunteer. Kezz is one of those people who can persuade everyone she meets to come and help. As a result the students have learnt beadwork, leatherwork, print painting, gardening, football but most of all cookery. At the end of term they hosted a restaurant night and cooked and served a three course meal for 40 people. What a wonderful evening and how impressive were our waiters and waitresses, as good as any restaurant in Zimbabwe!

We also have three volunteers in the therapy department, Nelletje for her second term in the occupational therapy was joined by Doris from Austria and Willeke joined the physio department. We made some staff changes in the therapy departments which has rejuvenated everyone. The OT department have been busy with all sorts of craft work which the children have loved. They also have their own garden and to see all the little boys coming back from gardening with their tools over the shoulders is a bit reminiscent of Snow white and the Seven Dwarfs! Finally after 8 months we were able to collect the artificial legs for two of our boys. This was a project supported by another one of our generous visitors. One of the boys, 16 year old Meli, had one leg fitted when he was 11 and we had all thought of him as short. With his two new legs fitted he suddenly grew. He put on his two new legs, long trousers, socks and shoes and simply sat in front of the physio mirror speechless. As for Goodwell, he was seen playing football with his new leg!

Sports were a big part of the term with our own cross country event, two sports days and two inter-schools events which are always so popular. Many of the children had to juggle demands for dance practise, sports practise and band as well as all their other activities. We have a very lively bunch of little boys this term who are always underfoot. How they loved the action of rushing round in their wheelchairs or walkers for their racing events. These little boys live in Singobile House and I recently filmed them making a bed – it was done in record time with little boys scrambling all over pulling covers this way and that – amazing!

Our band has been as busy as ever and this term we decided to make a good audio CD for publicity purposes. Little did we know that these days you don't just sit down and record a song. Each portion has to be recorded separately, first the instruments, then the backing singers and finally the main singers. So we spent 5 hours shut up in a room not much bigger than a table with 5 marimbas, 4 drums and 14 people! The result however is a very good CD with 5 of our best songs.

Finally, the most exciting event of the term, on Friday 24 March we held our music and dance show at the Bulawayo theatre. Both singers and dancers have been rehearsing really hard all term and the result was pure entertainment. *"Thank you for giving us the opportunity to shine"* was my thanks from the kids and wow did they shine – they were stars! Singers, band and dancers were absolutely amazing and the audience was blown away. I still don't know who were the most enthusiastic, the audience or the performers. Our theme was music and dance from the last 50 years and we had 4 dances and 12 songs, both local and international. Our dancers were deaf, our band disabled but that was never an issue – it was just pure professional entertainment and Bulawayo loved it. Prudence and Marvelous with newcomer, Tapiwa were the singers and the compères and carried the audience from song to song. Tapiwa who had started out as the sign language interpreter for the dancers was soon drawn in and ended up in one of the dances, wheelchair notwithstanding. By the end of the show everyone was on their feet in the aisles, arms waving in the air dancing and clapping. Since then the dancers have been asked to perform at two other shows and the band is busy practising for a regional music competition not to mention the gospel show we have been asked to put on at the end of the year. I could take this whole newsletter just writing about the show, we are all so proud of our performers! *"The best show I have seen at the theatre in the last 20 years"* was my favourite of all the compliments we received.

On Sunday the band will be entering their own song into a regional competition. If they win they will compete in Harare. Prudence wrote the song and the band learnt it in two afternoons. It is a wonderful song, one of those that gets into your head immediately and you find everyone suddenly singing it. Full of our Ndebele clicks it is a real battle for most of the band who come from the other end of the country. It is a sure winner but nothing is ever that straightforward. Our busy term just keeps on going, also on Sunday Prudence, Tapiwa, Marvelous and Thatcher who will be translated by Tapiwa will be interviewed for BBC radio so listen out for that one!

Our big dream is to take the band on tour, we would love to show that some good can come out of Zimbabwe. We will use the DVD from the show to audition for the Festival Mundial which is held in the Netherlands every year. Yes our dreams are big, but anyone who experienced Friday's show will understand why.

One of the main reasons we have had such a positive term is thanks to you, our friends. Seeing the need and having the funds to try and sort out that need makes us all feel good, we are back in business! Thank you for giving us that security and for enabling us to give our children the support they so desperately need and deserve!

