

KING GEORGE VI CENTRE

Emails: ihussey@kg6.co.zw, dkatandika@kg6.co.zw

It's been another term of ups and downs. It got off to an uncertain start as dates were confused (again!) and most teachers went on strike. We managed to persuade our teachers to come in to work with an added incentive to their totally inadequate salary (US\$150/month). Sadly we have now run out of funds to pay this incentive and it is possible that many of our teachers will now become as de-motivated as the majority of teachers in Zimbabwe.

However despite this confused start we have again managed to achieve much but have been weighed down with the never ending financial problems. Our most impressive achievement was the production of Marvelous' play, *I'm Disabled, So What*. Not only did Marvelous write a good play but he then went on to train his actors, direct the play and organise everyone so well that each evening saw the actors ready half an hour before the show was to start. In the words from the play – *every disabled child has a story to tell*. This story was poignant and harsh, breaking open the beliefs that so diminish the life of nearly every disabled child born in Zimbabwe, in fact in Africa! What a message and told in simple heart breaking terms that reduced most audiences to tears. Two of the actors were deaf and had to have voice overs, the main character was pre-recorded and in and out of the play was Liyana music. All this was managed by our 'technician' – Farai, for the first time on his own and producing perfect sound. These young people continue to amaze me with their organisation, dedication and talent - so much of it self taught. Farai also organised a film crew and will be producing a dvd of the play which hopefully will be shown on ZTV and followed up with other dramas about the lives of disabled people in Zimbabwe. Marvelous will try for a comedy next time as this last play was so tough on the actors that they were all in tears at the curtain call. This story was about their lives and experiences and it was brave to both write about it and act it!

Earlier in the term a group of 8 young people from KGVI and 4 from an organisation in support of orphans attended a filming workshop. They learnt the basics of camera work and put together a couple of very good short dramas which they then filmed. It was sad to see the KGVI drama was about a disabled singer who gets turned down at a singing competition. This rejection experienced by Prudence, Marvelous and Tapiwa still makes them very angry and comes up time and time again. The words – *you have an amazing singing voice but you cant entertain*, must be engraved on Prudence's heart! Two of the girls on the workshop are now making a short film about life in the hostel which if good enough we can use for fund raising.

We also held a workshop on proposal writing with 8 staff members, including some of the Liyana members, where some very useful ideas were shared. If only finances weren't so tight everywhere we might have tried to further some of these excellent ideas – a counselling centre for parents of disabled children, a sound and film studio, a computer repair business and an all girls band. In addition some of our teachers and students attended a wheelchair tennis coaching workshop run partly by one of our ex students, Nyasha Mharakurwa, who is currently high in the disabled tennis world rankings. We have a large number of keen students anxious to try out this sport but so far have failed to find a good court to practise on and the surface of our old basketball court is just too rough. A challenge for the future! Towards the end of term we held further workshops, one on sex education with our deaf students, facilitated by the Matabeleland Aids Council and another one on personal relationships with our Form

2s who seem to be all in love with the same boy! The children find these workshops really useful and appreciate the fact that their problems are taken seriously. Likewise with our Youth Committee who meet regularly to discuss problems in the independent living units.

A new addition this term has been weekly sign language workshops held with all staff. These have proved to be very popular and it's good to see everyone practising their sign language and communicating more confidently with our deaf students. We are now trying to find local sponsors to develop a poster with 100 basic signs displayed for use in public places (clinics, law courts, police stations) and work places that employ deaf staff. These sign language workshops have grown out of our deaf research programme. A group of 4 teachers went down to South Africa in August and made some good contacts with the WITS university deaf programme and with 3 deaf schools. They came back full of ideas and from these we devised our deaf advancement programme which includes improving the education of the deaf and developing a national sign language. The same teachers then visited the deaf school in Harare and discussed our programme with them as we have to go national on this or it will not succeed. Now we have the interest, the co-operation, the enthusiasm and the plans but no funding. I have sent the proposal all over the world but what with the world recession and the unpopularity of Zimbabwe I am not getting very far!

Which brings us to the difficult subject of finances. It is sad to report that having survived so much for so long we are now worse off than ever. This situation has come about because we are now operating in real money - US dollars or SA Rand. In the past most organizations in Zimbabwe were able to operate on foreign exchange gains. Now we have to find real money and there just isn't enough to go around any more. Most of our previous sources of income have fallen away, for instance international donors, local companies, foreign exchange gains, government. Even World Vision has had to cut back and has stopped donating food for our boarders! This leaves us with the goodwill of friends and the possibility of fees! We are so grateful for all those who have kept fund raising to keep KGVI alive. It is ridiculous that such an operation as ours is not supported by the government but this is not going to happen any time soon. In the meantime we have to look at the best options to keep ourselves operational. In October we held a Stakeholders meeting in order to discuss the future of KGVI. Everyone at the meeting has something to lose if we cannot continue to run KGVI – centre staff, school staff and parents. After a presentation and discussions it became clear that if we could get ALL our children to pay the required fees we could make up most of our shortfall. Sadly it is most unlikely that this will ever happen. In light of all this it was also decided that we would not have our usual end of year party and that our prize giving will just be a low key internal event.

Insisting on payment of fees may very well mean that children drop out of school but sadly we can no longer afford to carry them at KGVI. We will have to turn our attention to our disabled students and even with these we will need to be strict about payment of fees. Over the past few years we have also become a haven for socially distressed non-disabled children and out of our 64 vulnerable non-disabled children, 39 are true orphans with both parents deceased, several from child-headed households. It is hard for us to be ruthless but now funds do not allow us to be anything else! Following on from the meeting we have already set up a committee to re-assess our vulnerable families to see if more of them could find ways to pay fees. These children have become very much part of the KGVI family and they will not find the support we give them anywhere else but we are looking at tough times. These

fees (US\$250) would certainly help us but they are still only half of the true costs of carrying a child in our independent living houses for a term. (US\$600)

Unfortunately our ancient vehicles continue to break down and cost us money and in addition we have had a number of medical emergencies which have been a further draw on funds that aren't there anymore. Honest who was diagnosed with haemophilia but had never had any problems suddenly needed Factor 9, even more uncommon than the hard to obtain Factor 8! We appealed to the Haemophilia Association in South Africa and they came up with donated Factor 9 and loads of advice. Then Sonia became very ill and had to be kept in hospital on oxygen for 3 weeks. We rushed around to find our own cylinders and fittings in case of future emergencies. At present we have a little boy in traction in hospital (this means taking him meals every day as well as providing all medications!) and another boy needing Factor 8!

We have been very fortunate to have a little project money trickling in – some from AWS in Germany and some from Liyana's performances which inspire people like the British Embassy to donate. I wish we could send Prudence and Marvelous back to America to fund raise for us – I am sure they would do a better job than I am currently managing! With these funds we have been able to provide lunches for all our students, buy materials for our practical subjects and turn two old swimming pool change rooms into tiny classrooms for deaf classes. The swimming pool will be on hold until better times arrive!

Enough with the bad news. Now that the play is finished Marvelous and Farai are currently working on dvds on democracy for an international competition. They have some great ideas they are developing and hopefully we will be able to load both entries on to You tube. Update on the film *Music by Prudence* -this has been shortlisted (8 out of 37) films to be nominated for an academy award in February. We will wait and see what happens but are not counting too many chickens at this stage! Our prize giving was as touching as ever with an excellent rendition of *Heal the World* sung by Prudence and signed by a group of deaf seniors. This will be put on dvd to join the hostel film. Our plan next year is to hold a public signing day when we will tell people all about sign language and market our posters. Small features like sign singing will help to raise public awareness about the importance of this form of communication. Yes, we do still have plans!

Everyone at KGVI would like to thank you all for not losing interest in us. We know it is not easy for anyone these days which makes your continuing support all the more wonderful. One day things will turn around and we will find some security and take the pressure off you! In the meantime, thank you!

We wish you all a very Happy Christmas and good times for us all next year.

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