

KING GEORGE VI CENTRE

Visit made on Tuesday 3 July

A visit was made to coincide with the end of classes as that is when children come out of school, and return to their residential units. What I found was a wonderfully innovative and forward-looking centre, imbued with an atmosphere of relaxed fun and cooperation. The Centre serves all of Zimbabwe for secondary students, and southern Zimbabwe for primary age students. Ages served are from 5 to 18.

Firstly I learned that the school and its residential adjunct, the Amandla Centre are run as quite separate bodies. The school has its own office and headmistress. Inez Hussey and David Katandika are joint Directors of the Centre, with Inez having responsibility for fundraising. The fund raising done by centre personnel does flow over to assist the school. Basically as in all Zimbabwean schools, the government really only provides teachers' salaries. The buildings and grounds need other support. These buildings are very good, and started out as a lavishly funded 'whites only' school for the disabled. There is even a therapy pool, that cannot be run, as funds don't run to so much heating. There are plans to install solar heating for the pool in the future. Today there are three white students in a total of 185.

Amandla is a Ndebele word meaning 'Strength'. The Centre houses physically disabled children, some quite severe cases, and quite a number of deaf children too, who learn in a special unit for the hearing impaired. There has been a change of policy to promote independent living about three years ago. This has required funds to convert dormitory style 'care' oriented accommodation into family units. Six of these are in the school area, six are a little further afield, in walking distance of the school. The names of those in the school tell us a lot. The children chose the names for the units. Girls units are Roses and Paradise, boys are Famous Five and Gangsters, and the infant units are Singobile and Sunshine.

Sunshine is a new unit to accommodate the increasing number of very young children coming to the school. This is seen as a good thing, as children can start being more independent at an early age. The house-mothers for Sunshine have their salary paid with QSA funding. Merenia Nyathi and Gladys Ndlovu were both there and were assisting the youngsters who were given more time to play than the older children.

The youngest children and those least able to cope with moving around independently are housed in the grounds of the school. It was quite moving and impressive to see the caring and sharing that the philosophy of independent living has promoted. Girls in Paradise's kitchen were preparing their evening meal. The most competent with her hands was confined to a wheel chair, so a deaf girl was her 'legs' to fetch and carry things. Lunches are catered for centrally using vegetables from a school owned commercial garden. Each unit has its own vegetable patch, and we were shown them by one of Roses unit, in her wheel chair.

Rainbow Cottage was a staff house in the grounds of the school originally. When the decision was made just a few years back to emphasise independent living in family size units, a lot of alterations were made within the main complex. Rainbow cottage needed some additional work to give the house-mother privacy with a room and

bathroom added to the house. Other carefully budgeted minor alterations made concrete paths outside for wheel chair access widened doorways for access to toilet and kitchen areas. An attractive archway linking kitchen and living room makes the house much brighter too.

At the time of my visit, several of the children were there, and the house mother, Matilda Moyo was pleased to show me the improved conditions she is living in which gives her a little privacy away from the children's rooms. She also works during the day as a class assistant, so is doubly employed here. Growing some of their own food is an important part of independent living, as well as preparing and cooking the evening meal in each house. The children here are 2 small boys and four older girls. Pretty, one of the older girls was watering the greens in the vegetable garden close to the front door.

A small amount of QSA's funding was also used for Unique House, a few hundred metres down the road outside the Centre itself. This house has recently been bought to house another 10 children. Again, big girls and little boys. This is a lovely house in its own spacious garden, already growing kale and there are plans for a chicken run. Concrete paths have been put in for access, and ramps within the house where the level changes slightly. Their own dog lay on the warm concrete of the path, next to the bougainvillea. The children were gathered outdoors in the sun in the yard at the back, some hanging out their washing.

A donation of grey-blue fabric has been beautifully turned into bedspreads and curtains throughout the house, giving it a bright and neat appearance. All the beds so beautifully made by the children, in the girls' room were complete with hospital corners. They had been shown how to do this by their house mother, Mrs Mguni, who also works as the Centre's nursing sister during the day.

There is a great emphasis on cooperation and on economy. There are various moves to economise on electricity, one being to cook on coal stoves. Coal is plentiful and cheap. There is also a growing emphasis on solar power when it can be used.

There is some reliance on volunteer help from overseas. At present there are just two, one Australian with AVI is nearing the end of her two years, and looking forward to seeing her family and Sydney. She came with skills in working with people with disabilities. She assures me she is coming back. Africa is now 'under her skin'. There is a small accommodation block for staff, so accommodating volunteers is relatively inexpensive.

My discussions were largely with Inez, as Director and fund-raiser. Funding is the main problem. Overseas support to Zimbabwe is weaker than to many African countries as the political situation does not instil confidence in donors. There is no shortage of needs. There are special needs for individual children (I took a piece of sheepskin for a girl with a condition which has predisposed her to pressure sores) or materials for specific activities for the children, or upkeep of buildings. The next major project is a video with singing and drama.