

KING GEORGE VI CENTRE

Rehabilitation & Learning Centre for Physically Disabled & Hearing Impaired Children

Incorporating

Amandla Residential Village

Sponsors Report – March 2002

This has been a very difficult term for us all and now we cannot see much relief for the next term. Our biggest problem has been finding food for the children. By pleading, begging, borrowing and not quite stealing we have managed to provide enough mealie meal for the children but it has been difficult not having the extra to help out the staff. All the basic foods that the children depend on have been in short supply and it has been a full time job trying to find these hidden foods. We are not talking about luxuries here but about sugar, cooking oil, margarine, bread, milk. Thank goodness all the houses have their own supply of vegetables as this is another commodity which is now difficult to find. To add to all our other woes we have had a terrible heat wave and no rain since just before Christmas and this is the time when our crops should be ripening and fruit and vegetables in plentiful supply.

We have had to revise the children's weekly allowance on a regular basis but the sad thing is that when they go home their diets are likely to be even more basic. With the food situation in Zimbabwe we are really worried about the children, especially those from rural areas. For the first time we do not consider that our children are getting a truly balanced diet and we are now looking at providing vitamins and minerals to those children who are medically at risk. This will be yet another fund raising project. One little story to break the gloom – we heard of a miller who had mealie meal when it was not available anywhere else in town. Staff went down to visit him and discovered that he was disabled. They returned with two of the KGVI children and presented their case to the crowds waiting patiently for the desperately needed maize meal. The miller asked the crowds if they were prepared to let the children jump the queue and the verdict was unanimous – the children must be fed!

This has been a very short term because of Easter falling so early. It was also interrupted by the closure of all schools over our presidential election period. Some of our children were taken home but many of them from further afield remained at the Centre. Staff willingly took on the extra duties of looking after the children when they would normally have been at school. One day we even held an impromptu concert with both staff and children revealing hidden talents. This was a very worrying period for everyone, the general worry and depression affecting children as well as adults. However, as has been said many times before our children are resilient and somehow manage to give the rest of us hope.

Another problem that has affected us recently has been the difficulties experienced by our growing group of orphans. Many of them come back to school very late because extended family have other priorities. The problem then is that the children lose vital school time which they need if they are to succeed in exams and have an opportunity for the future. We are having to help more and more families with fees and now transport costs. If a child comes from Harare and has to be accompanied by an adult, because our buses will not assist a disabled child, the cost of return fares can be over Z\$10 000! It is tragic to see the growing number of ill parents and know what their children face in the coming months. But even here there are the heart warming stories, like the girl who has been lovingly cared for by a neighbour since her parents died or the little hearing impaired girl who is cared for by a brother who is barely out of school himself but who is determined to give her all the opportunities she would have had if her parents had been alive.

One of our older boys decided to try his luck at a school closer to his home. We were very sorry to lose Marvellous as he was one of our band of singers and performers. However we were proud that he felt able to try it alone. We worried about him when we heard he was in a class of 45 others and were only relieved when he asked to come back. He did not ask to come back because he was ill treated or because his confidence gave in. Sadly our schools do

not have the facilities to help disabled students who might need physiotherapy, nursing, more time, individual attention and planning for the future. Marvellous realised that if he had any hope of realising his dream to become a singer, we were his best chance. I would like to quote you a small portion of a poem he has just written about KGVI –

*We are well protected,
Away from danger.
We are bound by God's love,
A team we will always be.
In times of sorrow, we cry together.
KGVI it is,
Everyone is welcomed
Come today, I'll smile at you,
Feel free, this is home!*

The term has not been all problems. We held our usual sports days, one for infants and another for juniors and seniors. As usual all the children took part in some way or another. Even those who cannot manage to propel themselves were dressed up and pushed by a friend. One of the most exciting events was a mixed wheelchair and running relay which had everyone on their feet. The term finished with our Easter Parade when the children all make and model Easter bonnets and a variety of entertainment is provided, both religious and just pure fun from the little ones. The singing was wonderful as we have three very good singers among the seniors this year. We were pleased to have Marvellous back for this and with Pharis and Prudence we have an excellent choir. Prudence only started singing last year but her voice improves all the time. She recently held a visiting group of bankers spellbound when she sang her thanks for their donation!

Our new students have settled down very quickly, especially our new *babies* in Sunshine House. Two of these little ones had never seen a white face before and would scream whenever I came near them. It took one week before they were waving excitedly and shouting "*Hussey Hussey*" whenever they saw me. One of these little girls is amazing us all with her skill at writing with her foot. We have had to take several more students this term and our older houses at the hostel are now filled to capacity. How can we say no to a boy who has been kept away from schooling for a year but is desperate to learn? How can we keep out a boy whose family will not pay anything towards his education but who burst into tears when he was visited by KGVI staff and pleaded to be allowed back.

Team building efforts with staff have continued but this term we have concentrated on those staff working directly with the children. These weekly sessions have gone very well with a mixture of discussions and lectures on subjects such as chest physio, understanding disabilities and inter-personal relationships. These sessions have also been very helpful for those houseparents who are having a problem with a particular child as we can all share ideas and suggestions.

Counselling continues to be a very important part of our work and this term we have had to venture into the tricky world of counselling our hearing impaired children. One of our trained counsellors teamed up with Sindile Mhlanga and together they have been counselling a teenage girl who became suicidal after problems at home. Sindile is a past pupil who is now teaching at the school. Because he lost his hearing when he was 12 he has excellent language as well as sign language skills. Both the girl and Sindile were amazed that it was possible to 'talk' about problems with other people and how much it helped! Each counselling sessions reveals new problems, so many of our children are desperately worried about their parents; they seem to have a greater understanding of the dangers of AIDS than their parents do. The threat of this terrible illness weighs on the minds of so many of our children. During a recent poetry competition held at the school there were more poems about AIDS than any other subject.