

KING GEORGE VI CENTRE

Rehabilitation & Learning Centre for Physically Disabled & Hearing Impaired Children
Incorporating
Amandla Residential Village

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“No child should come into this world only to find all the doors already closed” – this was something that came our way in some literature on child rights and it seems particularly poignant for the children in our care. With disability, aids and poverty I think we can assume that there will be very few open doors in their lives, unless we can give them the means to prise them open! I am sorry that this report is so long but there is so much that needs saying!

This term has brought the usual mix of good and bad. Obviously the extreme poverty and downright hunger which is now being experienced in Zimbabwe is leading to an escalation of numerous social problems. Many of our children are being neglected, abused, ignored, underfed and understimulated. KGVI cannot afford to employ a social worker so our present staff must try and deal with as many of these problems as possible. Three of our staff have attended counselling courses and this training is now being put to the test time and again. All three staff members are seeing individual children or groups of children on a regular basis, and have many others queuing up waiting. The stories are always along the same sad themes – neglect, abuse by step-families, loneliness, unhappiness and uncertainty for the future.

The most tragic break down of families comes from parents and older siblings dying of HIV AIDS. Every term brings yet another orphan back to KGVI. So far there has always been a relative to bring them back and to collect them at the end of term. However this term we were left with two children long after the others had gone home. The sad resignation on their faces made us all ashamed. Finally a long lost aunt turned up for the little boy but the girl we had to send home with one of our staff members as no one in the family came for her!

This past holiday one of our very insecure little girls lost her mother. She had always been very close to her mother and we had to endure weeks of tears and tantrums at the beginning of each term while Urmilla adapted to life away from home. She was originally brought into boarding because her mother had TB. We have all watched with great sadness as her mother has become sicker. Finally last holiday she died and Urmilla was brought back to school by her father. This term there were no tears, as KGVI had become the haven, the stability in her life. It is tragic to see how ill her father is now looking. The only ray of hope for this poor little girl is that she has a caring grandmother who looks as if she will take on the burden of caring for yet another grandchild. Stories like this are now commonplace but no more easy to deal with. We now have 8 orphans at the Centre and 23 children who have lost one parent. This does not take into account the children whose parents have abandoned them or who only have one guardian parent. Of the 84 children in boarding only 29% are cared for by both parents!

An increasing number of our children are now being passed to other relatives as their parents or guardians leave for greener pastures in England, South Africa or anywhere else they can get jobs. Zimbabweans are leaving the country in huge numbers as economic refugees. Some are able to take their families but too many leave their children in the care of unsuitable relatives or friends which only means more trauma and marginalisation for the children.

Finding enough basic foodstuffs has been one of our biggest problems over this term. Our children live on a fairly basic diet and our main purchases for them are generally maize meal,

cooking oil, milk, sugar, bread, margarine, green leaf vegetables, tomatoes, dried bean, dried fish and a little meat. The recent severe drought in the region on top of loss of commercial production in the country has meant that we are now desperately short of maize meal, sugar, cooking oil, margarine and vegetables - you will note the correlation between these two lists. Maize meal is no longer available in the shops and we often have to substitute with expensive alternatives such as pasta, rice and bread (50 kg of maize meal costs Z\$1,118 while the same quantity of rice costs Z\$8 450)! Luckily between the Centre garden and the children's own gardens we are more or less self-sufficient in vegetables, which is more than can be said for many in the country.

A worrying aspect of these food shortages has already been noted both countrywide and here at KGVI. Many of our children come back to school malnourished and therefore easily succumb to various illnesses. This term we have had more cases of malaria and influenza than ever before. The sick room at the hostel has not been empty since term started at the beginning of May! A good healthy diet is the recommendation for most of the physical conditions affecting our children. Sadly most parents just cannot manage this ideal diet and when the children go home for holidays their conditions often deteriorate. One of our MD boys has spent most of the term in the sickbay with many people despairing of his life. However, with courage, determination and good care, he fought through and has now gone home. This was a dilemma for us - do we send him to his very impoverished home or do we arrange for someone to stay on at KGVI and care for him. Our solution has been to let him go home but to give his family some basic food to try and give him an adequate diet. This is a problem which can only get worse as the food shortage in the country deteriorates. We even have one young girl who does not want to eat too much while at school so she doesn't build up her appetite for when she has to go home and share with her large family! In addition malnourishment is increasing deaths from AIDS which will only create yet more orphans.

In light of all this the importance of independent living training cannot be over emphasised. We have to make sure that our children can do as much as possible to help themselves. Extended families are very reluctant to take on a child with a disability so we have to ensure that the child can be an asset to the new family. We held another very successful parents/guardians workshop this term which helps show families how much their child can achieve.

This year we have had to promote many of our smaller children into the main independent living houses. This has come about because of the large number of children coming into the bottom end of the Centre. Our waiting list for places for 2003 now stands at 30 and more than three-quarters of these children are under 8's. Our policy has always been to bring in children as young as possible in order to start rehabilitation before bad physical patterns become too set and while the child is at his/her most receptive. This is still our policy but we are now creating problems with our houses as the little ones move up and have to be trained by the diminishing numbers of older children. Much to our delight things worked out better than we could have hoped. The older children have willingly taken on the added responsibility and the little ones have quickly matured and taken on their share of the chores. The family feeling in the houses is strong and it is always good to visit them in the afternoon to see the younger children being helped with homework, or to sit in at one of the house meetings and to see the good exchange of ideas between all house members.

It has also been heart warming to see how the children are prepared to help each other. Each child is required to bring in enough personal cleaning items for the term. Increasingly children are not able to bring enough from home. This sounds a fairly basic requirement but if you realise that a large tube of toothpaste can cost over Z\$450 you realise that for many families such an outlay is impossible. Now we are finding that those children who have enough are willing to share with their 'family' members. This is not an easy decision to make when you yourself come from a poor home. It has been wonderful to see the blossoming of one of our orphans who was

taken in by a neighbour when her mother died. Lizzie has understandably had behavioural problems in the past but is now taking responsibility in her house and sharing her own meagre soap supply with a little girl who came with nothing. Not only that, but she was the one who came to scold me when we had to build a septic tank right where her house's garden plot was. Thanks to Lizzie they have now been given another piece of land and are busy planting vegetables for self-sufficiency.

Our Independence & Integration Forum is a special event we are planning for the end of August. We have invited past students of KGVI to attend a 2 day forum at the Centre. We want to evaluate the effectiveness of our independence programme as well as look at our future development. We would like to give more opportunities and support to our school leavers and feel that input from those who have already left and been able to find employment or self-employment or failed to find jobs at all will be invaluable. At the same time we will formally set up a KGVI Old Scholars Association to give further support to present and future school leavers. Already we are finding more opportunities for our school leavers. This term we have a girl learning hairdressing and a boy welding at a government vocational training centre. A recent visit to the centre was most encouraging with everyone hard at work and some very good products on sale. Another of our boys has been employed by a small-scale farmer just out of town. He is busy looking after gardens, sheep and mushrooms and on a recent visit was thrilled to show us round his new domain!

The term has also brought the usual sporting and arts activities. Our cross country event is always impressive, with almost every child moving over some distance, whether creeping over a short distance, moving backwards or over a proper course in the case of our hearing impaired students. Later in the term we had our tabloid sports which are especially designed and graded so that every child can succeed at every activity. The children divide into teams, choose themes and decorate themselves appropriately, this term the main themes seemed to be football and food! This is always a worthwhile event where every child is being willed on to succeed, you only had to watch one of our little girls playing a darts type game with her foot to understand!

For our singers it has been a very exciting team. In May Pharis and Marvellous were lucky enough to go to Athens where they took part in a Euroline international arts workshop. This was a wonderful opportunity for the boys and judging from the calls for *Zimbabwe* whenever they left the stage, they represented us well. From Pharis' report *-One evening we managed to perform on the stage, I mean our own music we brought all the way from Zimbabwe. Mostly, our music touched their hearts and everyone let tears flow down their cheeks. I think they never expected such soft love songs being sung by Marvelous and I. The hall echoed with well tuned voices while the audience were crying for some more.*

The excitement did not end there as recently our singers were asked to compose songs in honour of Ms Malaika. The Malaika competition is run throughout southern Africa and the present winner comes from Bulawayo. This contact with Ms Malaika has been very beneficial as she is a very popular personality and according to our girls, a role model for them all. Three very impressive songs were composed and sung by the children and they have been asked to perform at the new Malaika selections at the end of August. In addition we are hoping for a recording of a Malaika album with our songs and a poem written by one of the senior girls. All this publicity is good both for our singers and for KGVI.

I cannot emphasise enough how much we appreciate your support. With so many big donors abandoning Zimbabwe, we are now reliant on all our friends to see us through. Without your help we would have to turn the children away and they would not have access to the independent living training which gains importance every term as more and more children are abandoned. Thank you for doing your part to open at least some of those doors!