

‘BUILDING MORE THAN JUST A PLAYGROUND’

*Sadly there is a growing orphan problem in sub-Saharan Africa due mainly to the scourge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Awareness of the desperate plight of these children living amidst poverty and disease has resulted in on-going orphanage support initiatives by international schools, of which **Peebles High School** is one. Other schools include Aquinas College from Melbourne (Australia), and St George’s British International School in Rome.*

*In June 2006, a party of 15 students and staff, mainly from St George’s, left Rome for a two week visit to Zambia. The group included **Suzanne Cleland** from Peebles High School. They spent their time in the small town of Serenje working at a new orphanage which the three schools have been supporting. The main focus of the visit was to get to know the children and to assemble a prefabricated playground for them. The leader of the party was **Kevin Gilbert**, a teacher at St George’s, who had helped found the orphanage when he worked there as a volunteer teacher (2002-4)...here is his perspective on this historic trip.*

Building relationships with the orphans

On Monday 3 July 2006, we arrived at the site of the orphanage, excited to see the kids for the first time and were not disappointed.....they are all beautiful, healthy (thanks to the regular feeding programme established by Alouis Mwansa, the Manager)...and full of fun.

There are some 37 registered orphans, ranging in age from 3 to 14. Our students related to them immediately, playing football, singing, dancing, reading, drawing and colouring. Most importantly, our students were affectionate, picking up and cuddling the kids, something which they don’t get enough of. Indeed the orphans would hang on to us, touching our hair, holding tight to our hands and fighting for our attention. A pattern soon emerged where each day started with drawing numbers and letters, followed by singing, then football, then quiet time before lunch. The older orphans who attend school, translated the stories of most of the other orphans for us...we recorded these in exercise books together with their work for the day. It was wonderful to observe the interaction between our group and the orphans...indeed, often whilst the playground construction was underway, the students were torn between doing manual work at the site or playing with and teaching the children...building relationships was arguably even more important than building the playground!

Building the Playground

Now to a major focus of our efforts in Serenje...the assembly of the playground. The playground equipment was initially purchased in South Africa in December 2005, and after many delays (and hundreds of emails!), was finally delivered to Serenje a week before we arrived (6 months after purchase)! Once we unpacked it, we discovered that all the nuts and bolts had gone missing (probably stolen en route)! It took us a few days to source replacement parts, and our students then got down to the task. What was particularly impressive, was that the playground task was handed over totally to the students who used hard work, perseverance and improvisation (always essential in Africa!), to complete the task. Earlier in the week, they refused to be discouraged by the

loss of the nuts and bolts, and whilst we waited for substitutes, they used initiative to build a football field for the children...this proved another great relationship-builder.

Visiting hospitals and orphanages

During the week, some students also visited the local Serenje District Hospital. The students were given a guided tour of the wards and spoke to Victor, the sole doctor in the district. He has been there for 8 months, the first doctor there in 4 years! His duties include all surgical operations as well as routine medical work. Our students were well-informed of HIV/AIDS but in practice it was harrowing to see patients suffering. The case of one 13 year old girl was particularly moving...she had a severely swollen leg which was later amputated. The girls in our group took a toy to her the next day. One only has to wonder the future for her.

Planning for the future

Our last day with the children at the orphanage site was especially memorable: some of the students were putting the finishing touches to the playground, others were playing for the last time with the orphans, and Alouis chaired a meeting of the Board of Management in the temporary shelter on the site. He briefed the representatives about the rapid progress being made with the dormitory construction (funded almost totally by Aquinas College, with completion by October), as well as about future plans and priorities (decided by a meeting with our student group the previous evening...cheques from St George's and Aquinas were handed over, plus a contribution from Suzanne Cleland) ...he thanked all sponsors (through our group present on site), and then a new committee to assist him was elected.

After this, all of us (orphans, committee members, students from our group, builders etc) joined hands in a great circle and a brief prayer said...we then opened the playground for the children, and took photos of the whole community in front of the playground equipment and dormitory. The children loved the playground, and it was timely for our group to give them all a final hug, before we climbed into Alouis' vehicle and slowly left the site holding back silent tears ...we knew that the children would miss us, but at least they now had the playground, a fitting reminder of our ongoing commitment to them. It was a fantastic 2 weeks!!! Frustrating at times, full of emotion, but so enriching for each of us...we thank the Peebles, Aquinas and the St George's communities for their wonderful, hopefully ongoing, support.