

VMS NEWSLETTER 2012



In January VMS celebrated its 10th anniversary and how we have grown over the last decade! From a modified, dilapidated mobile home that had borne the brunt of the 2000 floods, with an enrolment of 3 bewildered orphans, an unqualified and equally lost teacher/driver/administrator, and her loyal domestic worker/cook/gardener... to a “proper” school with a staff of 12 dedicated and committed women. Three contract drivers daily deposit their precious loads of 59 young students to the school. And VMS monitors 115 HIV+ children from 19 villages as part of the outreach program!!! What an amazing journey we have all had, and what a lot we have learned.

The educational programme forges ahead...

VMS was forced to drop Grades 1-3, due to the incompetence of our Provincial Dept. Of Education (which has since been taken over by the National DOE) and so we reverted to being a pre-school. It took a while to get used to all the tiny tots running around the school with no older children to help us keep an eye on them during break time and lunch! There was a lot more wailing and screaming for the first few days as the newcomers were left in this strange place with new faces, and the worst of all, being left with a “mukhuwa” (white) woman while their grateful “goggos” (Grannies) scuttled away in relief.

The toddlers, 18mths to 3yrs are schooled in the dormitory of the Halfway House by Teacher Joyce who joined VMS earlier this year. And the pre-schoolers (aged 3 to 4) are being taught by Memory, a young Zimbabwean who has been attending workshops and training with an Oxfam partner, the Thusanang Trust. The Trust is a leading Early Childhood Development (ECD) organisation in Limpopo Province with accredited qualifications and skills training. Memory returns to school brimming with new ideas and full of enthusiasm.



The ECD course includes regular site visits from Trust assessors and we had to modify the classroom to meet their requirements. Fortunately VSA (Volunteer Students abroad) students from Glasgow University were visiting. They painted the classroom a fresh sky blue and donated money for cupboards and shelves. What a pleasure it was to remove the unsightly (and difficult to clean) planks and bricks that had been used as shelving since the school started in 2005.

Principal Florence teaches the grade R's (4 to 5 yrs) and has also been trying to register the school with the Dept of Social Development which will provide us with a contribution towards the running costs. Since Florence started at

VMS in 2005 she has continued to study through correspondence courses and is well qualified for the challenging task of educating our youngsters and managing the educational programme.

The dedication and hard work of our educational staff was very apparent at the end of year graduation ceremony. Guests and parents/guardians were entertained by the children singing and dancing. Everybody was very impressed with the children's confidence of and astounded by their grasp of the English language. This is always a highlight of my year as I alternate between bouts of laughing and tears of pride. The school is attracting large numbers of paying children which helps to subsidise those unable to pay the fees. And, as everybody in the community is aware that VMS caters predominantly to children affected by the AIDs pandemic, it is doing a lot to alleviate ignorance and stigma.

The VMS Outreach programme runs smoothly...

under the firm hand of Khathu, our Outreach Coordinator. In truth, she is our "Girl Friday", taking on all the admin, organising and facilitating the support groups and collecting and collating the field data collected by Takalani (Taki), her Outreach Assistant. Most importantly Khathu handles all the finances and prepares the books for both the educational and outreach programmes for our External Auditors. This young single mother is also studying part time through Intec (an accredited SETA institution) and will qualify as a Junior Bookkeeper in November next year. As testament of her hard work and dedication the results of our Audit are excellent and the Auditors have commended her for the accuracy of her work which makes us very proud. Money donated via Hope for Limpopo, Inc. (www.hopeforlimpopo.org.) enabled us to buy a special Pastel programme, and train Khathu on how to use it. The "NPO Tracker" has proved to be a great help in ensuring that Funder's donations are properly accounted for.

Her assistant, Taki, visits 95 homes in 19 villages on a regular basis. She monitors 115 HIV+ children (including those at the local orphanage) between the ages of 6 and 17 for adherence to the strict drug regime, checks their food security and possible abuse of government grants. Taki lives in Dopeni village with her common-law husband, older daughter and grandchild, and younger daughter, Hudi who has been a member of the children's support group since it began in 2007. Last year young Ronewa was welcomed into Taki's already over extended family. She had been referred to VMS by Sumbandila, the Ridgeway College outreach programme, and was in a very bad state both medically and psychologically. Ronewa stayed for a while in the Halfway House until she regained her strength and confidence and learned the ARV drug regime. She now attends the secondary school behind VMS and regularly bounces in for a hug and chat – a far cry from the sick little girl who buried her face in her arms if anyone spoke to her. As a valuable member of our outreach program she stands tall and strong at events when asked to give talks about her status and offer words of encouragement and advice to her peers.

Later in the year, Taki once again opened her heart and home to another sibling of the Sumbandila scholarship trust. Phathu, an 11 year old boy and his older brother spent a weekend at the Halfway House and attended a workshop facilitated by older members of the children's support group. We were appalled to hear that he had not been told he was HIV+, and Khathu, helped by two of the older children, had the formidable and heartbreaking task of breaking the news to this small boy. I was impressed by their maturity, compassion and confidence as they disclosed their own status and allayed his fears. Three of the older boys from the VMS support group spent the night with them at the Halfway House, they had a braaivleis (barbecue), and by example showed the youngster how they manage their meds.

When he had to leave, he cried as he had enjoyed himself so much, and some of the children exchanged phone numbers so that they could keep in touch with and encourage him. After more hospital visits it was eventually decided that Phathu would stay at the Halfway House until he had regained his strength and learned to take control of his own meds. Phathu's ARV regime was changed as it seems he had built up resistance to the first regime and he

was also diagnosed with T.B. As this little boy had no home to return to after he had stabilised, it was decided he would stay with Taki. Thanks to donations from Hope for Limpopo (HFL), in 2013 we will be able to build an extension to her house so that he can have his own room.



Taki, Ronewa, Phathu, daughter & grandchild



Phathu

Once again the VMS staff go above and beyond the boundaries of their job descriptions, and although Phathu has a long road to recovery, staying with a family and having a “mom” and older siblings to look after him has made him a much happier child. Both these children fall out of our “area of operation” but the alternative would have been the local orphanage where their special needs would definitely not have been met. Phathu needed far more attention than Ronewa as his emaciated body was covered with sores which he scratched repeatedly. Taki had to help him bathe and anoint the wounds with special creams, and watch his diet carefully. A few times she expressed concerns that she was worried about the effect this was having on her family and particularly on her relationship with her husband. When I suggested we make alternative plans though, she would always refuse and say “He is now my family!” Next year he will attend a local school with his ‘sister” Hudi”. As both these children are registered at another hospital, Taki has the added chore of travelling and spending a full day when they need their monthly meds and checkups. “Well Done!” to this amazing woman for ‘normalising’ the lives of these two children.

Thanks to our funding from Oxfam...

VMS hosts and facilitates three separate support groups: one for children on the ARV drug regime, one for the caregivers that take care of them and one for HIV+ women and men.

The children’s support group has been meeting since 2007 and strong bonds of friendship have formed between them. The meetings are well attended and the children decide what they would like to do and where they see the group going in the future. Unemployment and limited career choices are important issues that need to be addressed. As a large number of the children struggle with their schooling, the VMS teachers give of their time on Saturdays and holidays to help with homework and improving their English. Sourcing local businesses to help with basic skills training has proven fruitful and next year some of the older children will learn sewing, carpentry and subsistence farming with vegetables, chickens and goats.

As food security is such an important facet of living positively with HIV, a gardening workshop was held at VMS for 12 children and a member from each of their families. The workshop was facilitated by our two school gardeners who went to Madzivhandila Agricultural College to learn the basics of running a seedling nursery and a vegetable garden. Besides learning about starting and maintaining a garden, the children also learned the importance of compost and “companion” plants (basil, garlic and marigolds) that keep the bugs at bay without having to use insecticides.



A home garden



Food parcels

The children were transported home with a set of tools (a wheelbarrow, spade, fork, hoe, and watering can), a bag of fertilizer as well as vegetable and companion herb seedlings. The response has been these young gardeners were not only starting to put fresh food on the family table, but that it has given them a sense of responsibility. The Dept of Agriculture, which has shown great interest in this project, kindly gave of their time to judge the gardens, and at a special get-together (attended by 60 children from the ARV support group) they awarded prizes and certificates, and gave motivational talks on the importance of being able to produce vegetables for the family. Their speeches were encouraging and they promised to try and assist in training some of the children in basic animal husbandry and crop farming. This is important as so many of the children do not do well academically and we need to revert back to a subsistence type of lifestyle to enable them to feed their families and hopefully earn a small income. Once again I was filled with pride as the children themselves facilitated the program, introduced the different speakers, and some of them spoke about living a full and healthy life with HIV. This really amazed the Dept as they had not previously come into contact with HIV+ youngsters who were so confident and open about their status.

Another gardening highlight was on Mandela's Birthday when 12 officials from the Dept. of Agriculture came to spend their 67 minutes of community service by working in the school garden. They were given tools and with much joking and laughter these usually desk bound men took off their jackets and weeded and hoed under the watchful eyes of the women gardeners. Later that afternoon we spent our time for Madiba by going to a few of the children's houses to erect fences to protect their small veggie patches from the ravages of neighbouring cows, chickens and goats. Grateful thanks to Hope For Limpopo for donating money for the fencing as well as to the Scottish volunteers who willingly assisted with the installation, and the community members who took pity on us and came to lend a hand with the hard digging.

A major event for the children from the ARV support group was when 22 of them went by bus (kindly donated by Ridgeway College) to the Indigenous Knowledge Centre at Leshiba Wilderness, (www.leshiba.co.za) situated high up in the beautiful Soutpansberg Mountains. During the two night visit they went on a bush drive (in open game land rovers which for some was the highlight of the trip!!) saw a variety of wild animals, and learned about issues like poaching, and the danger of extinction. On a guided walk with two very knowledgeable game rangers they saw rock paintings and learned about the Bushman and Khoisan people, and the rangers showed them examples of medicinal plants that these early people had used. The visit ended with a drama that the children performed for some of the Leshiba staff and a few tour representatives, and all were impressed with their confidence and honesty. John and Gill, the owners of this mountain paradise, were so impressed with the group that they have adopted VMS as one of their community projects.



Children from ARV support group performing a drama at Leshiba

Another first for these children was participating in a Fun Run in our nearest town, Louis Trichardt. The rainy and overcast day did not dampen spirits as we ran (in some cases limped!!) the 5kms and then danced and sang at the finishing line to encourage the stragglers. Meeting a group of runners from Emmanuel Christian School resulted in donations of much needed second hand clothing.

Later in the year 22 of the older children spent a night at a clubhouse in the Thathe Vondo Forest Reserve. Assisted by the 9 volunteers from Scotland, the children were dropped off at strategic picnic/fishing sites around the lake to pick up litter. This not only taught them about their environmental responsibilities but they saw firsthand how beautiful the bush looked after they had cleaned up the numerous plastic bags, tins etc. The day ended with a celebration party for my child's 13th birthday, and the volunteers decorated the small hall, and showed them lots of games. A local DJ supplied music and strobe lights and the youngsters danced 'til the wee hours before wrapping themselves in their blankets and falling asleep. These boys and girls have been attending meetings together for more than 5 years and I was touched by the camaraderie between them and the easy manner in which they joked and teased each other. It is important for them to realise they can be "friends" with the opposite sex as this will certainly help them in their future relationships.

According to feedback from the doctors at the Siloam Hospital Wellness Centre (a HIV/AIDS clinic), our outreach program has dramatically decreased the number of children dying due to non-compliance to the ARV drugs. Other AIDs Wellness Centres heard about the success of our Children's Support Group and began asking for assistance. Facilitated by the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme (TVEP), we met with representatives from the two other Wellness Centres in our district. Caregivers and children from VMS answered questions and told the group why they thought the VMS support group was so successful, with the children speaking openly about their status to the amazement of them all. A draft issue of "A guide for the implementation of The VMS Children's Support Group Model" was subsequently produced and although still a "work in progress" has been sent to interested parties.

Some of the children have become young advocates and facilitated a workshop attended by 56 children, 12 of whom were transported to VMS from another support group which had started at Tshilidzini Hospital. On another occasion a few of them travelled to a clinic at Donald Fraser Hospital where they facilitated a meeting with caregivers and children. The meetings include education on the necessity for strict drug adherence and healthy eating habits, motivational talks, and games. Socialising with other HIV+ children who are open and confident about their status is extremely important as at both these clinics previous support group meetings were held behind closed doors with the curtains drawn. Even more disturbing is that some of the children did not even know they were HIV+ and had been lied to as to why they had to take medicine twice a day!!! This of course perpetuates stigma and is not tolerated by our children.

Janet Talbot and Jacqueline Joshua from the Children's Rights Centre once again visited VMS and stayed at the Halfway House for 2 nights. The 22 older support group members played team games which were not only educational but also related to their daily life experiences, and improved their knowledge of HIV/AIDS.



The children learned about the 5 basic children's rights and how to bring about change for themselves and other children in a nonviolent way. They made banners and were taught how to write letters of complaint. Sister Tshidzumba from Phuluso, the Wellness Centre at Siloam Hospital, attended a meeting and heard children's grievances regarding unfair treatment by some of the staff and the time wasted during the hospital visits.

They wrote letters and the Sister promised to take them to a management meeting and copies were made for the children to post in the suggestion box. To date there has been no improvement, but there have been meetings about "down referrals" to local clinics which are open over the weekends. We hope that soon the children will be able to collect their meds without having to miss a day at school.



My daughter, Vhuhwavho (Woo for short!), the initiator of the children's ARV support group has made a name for herself as a young aids activist. In December we were approached by a cape based magazine group (Cape Media) to ask if they could publish a feature story of her life. Imagine our amazement and pride when her picture appeared on the front cover. Next year she will attend Ridgeway College as a member of the Sumbandila Scholarship Trust and will continue to empower and educate HIV+ children.

An important facet of the ARV children's support group is the regular meetings with the caregivers. It seems a bit pointless keeping the children informed and up to date with HIV/AIDs and not including the people who have the task of looking after them. These caregivers are usually elderly traditional Goggos and as the children reach puberty other problems (besides the usual teenage issues) begin to surface: older boys demanding the foster grants be given to them to spend as they wish, and in one case, a young girl demanding she gets paid to take her meds-!! Discipline is a problem for these elderly folk who have the formidable task of bringing up their grandchildren when they should be spending their twilight years in relative peace and serenity.

Last year five caregivers attended a three day Home Based Care course through a local NGO called the Far North Community Care and Development Organisation. They learned basic nursing skills for HIV+ children and adults, completed a general First Aid Course and received their certificates in January. This has given them a lot of confidence and enhanced the quality and range of care they are able to provide. They take turns looking after ailing youngsters at the Halfway House making their new skills even more valuable.

It is also import to keep the caregivers informed about new developments so they have learned about the possible side effects of the ARV drugs on their young charges, such as strokes at an earlier age, hearing loss, and stunted growth (see attached "Healing Touch Helps HIV Patients"). It was a challenge for us, because we did not want to frighten them but they had to be made aware so that they can recognise symptoms and take the necessary action.

Some ways of minimising these effects are by regular exercise, encouraging play-touching and body massages. It is wonderful to know that our “huga-huga” (lots of hugs-!!) policy might be making a difference to long term positive living.



Coincidentally, two massage therapists, Cary and Barb, from the US Virgin Islands visited VMS later in the year. The VMS staff members were given a talk on the benefits of massage therapy and then they took turns to knead and be kneaded!! Normally resistant to “touching”, these Venda women took to massage like the proverbial ducks to water. It became a very long and harassing day for me though as I suddenly found myself “solo in charge” of running the entire school. I did manage an occasional peep through the windows of the Halfway House only to see my hard working staff being oiled and pampered.

The only motion was when they raised a languid head and told me to check the babies, stir the pots of food, and chase the goats out the garden etc. A few days later the caregivers were given the same treatment but due to busy end of the year schedules we could not manage a session for the children’s group. Luckily Cary and Barb fell in love with VMS and with help from HFL and friends are returning in 2013 to hold more training sessions.

For the first time, a few men have joined the support and caregivers meetings. This is a real breakthrough as the majority of infected men tend to live in denial, do not take the meds, do not practise safe sex, and more often than not abandon their wives and families and return only when they are sick and need to be taken care of. VMS hosted a “men’s only” caregivers meeting which was facilitated by Munna ndi Nnyi, (Who’s the Real Man?) a local NGO addressing violence against women and children by targeting men. This one-to-one dialogue was very successful. Some of the men are single parents and they enjoyed being able to share their concerns and come up with solutions.

With encouragement and financial support from HFL, the goat project started with great enthusiasm, but soon became a time consuming nightmare. Although the first 3 caregivers and a few staff members attended a basic husbandry course, the learning curve was expensive and heartbreaking. Three goats died and I had to attend the post-mortems done at the local vet which were major lessons in self control as I battled not to vomit and cry (no easy task!!) One had died from eating plastic bags and the others from tick borne diseases. We decided to keep the goats at VMS, build up our stock and do more training before sending them out to the caregivers. A real breakthrough was help from Limpopo Animal Health Consultancy and Suppliers (LAHCOS) a small business started in the village to assist rural farmers with advice, treatment, consultation and supply of veterinary meds.

The first goat kids



Goats milk enjoyed on the morning porridge



Takalani, a young graduate student working at LAHCOS, visits VMS regularly to check the goats and teach some staff members about vaccines, dipping and de-worming. A very handsome Alpine ram was bought and a few months later there was great excitement when 3 babies were born. I threatened to move my desk into the yard as they were a joy to watch prancing around, getting into mischief and playing with the children. Screams from the kitchen usually meant a few goats were standing on the tables while the children were eating, and shouts from the garden meant they were either in the dust bins or had broken into the vegetable garden. Another HFL follower from the US Virgin Islands, Fernando Micheletti, donated money to the project and is very keen to see it becoming self sustainable so we are working towards this goal. Once again HFL friends have made an important connection and we continue to appreciate their valuable support.

Volunteers come and go...

Every year 9 or 10 young students from Glasgow University spend two months at the Halfway House. This year some of them painted classrooms, made a puppet theatre for the ARV children's support group and chaperoned the children on their litter clean up day party. They also donated a generous amount of money to our classroom building fund. A young Peace Corps volunteer arrived for a two year stint but we were shocked when after a few months she left rather abruptly. We were assured by Peace Corp that she had been happy working at VMS and that she had had no problems staying in the village with a host family. This was extremely disappointing as VMS had gone through a lot of time and expense in sourcing and repairing her accommodation but even worse was that projects she had started in the community had to be abandoned. To date we still have not received official notification from Peace Corps as to why they had found it necessary to break her contract with us.

Death touched our school of life...

Teacher Constance, who suffered a major stroke 2 years ago, died at her home after battling with high blood pressure. The VMS staff went to her village to participate in an evening memorial service held at a beautiful church overlooking the sacred Funduzi Lake. Friends, family and comrades (she was a staunch member of the ANC) spoke about her loyalty and dedication. She leaves behind 3 young children, aging parents and 2 sisters, and is sorely missed by all of us.

The year ends on high note...

The children were extremely lucky as they received Christmas gifts from two sources: Even though stricken by their own personal loss with the death of their husband and father, Arlene Wolpret and her two daughters, Stacey and Jessica once again gave of their time and money to buy gifts of clothing, toys and shopping vouchers for the older children. Local representatives from an organisation called Santa's Shoe Boxes also came to hand out presents. These beautifully wrapped and individually labelled gifts from both these donors were not only for the 59 children at the school but also for the 115 youngsters in the outreach program. Oxfam and Netcare Johannesburg gave cash donations to ensure that the more destitute families had substantial food parcels over the long holiday period. We are very grateful to all of them for bringing such wonderful Christmas cheer to our children and their families.

Assistance from local businesses is always much appreciated...

AUM, an Indian association in Louis Trichardt kindly donated 150 blankets which went a long way in keeping our support groups and school children warm. **Leach Printers** once again printed all our progress reports and certificates. **P & L Hardware** gave us good discounts on tools for our young gardeners, and a local factory, **JSR clothing**, donates a monthly bag of mealie-meal.

And overseas sponsors were sourced at an unusual event when...

Cristina Kessler, award winning author of children's books, organised and hosted a Magical Evening at St. John, where she lives in the US Virgin Islands. A huge thanks to HFL and all those who contributed to make this a splendid evening of first class entertainment, and "magically" managed to persuade some generous folk to sponsor six pre-schoolers. I add a special note of appreciation to Sprauve, a small local school who took it upon themselves to sponsor a young boy. It always touches my heart when children want to help those less fortunate than themselves. Sponsors from The Church of Scotland, the US Virgin Islands and HFL are sponsoring a total of 23 children.

And last but definitely not least...

We extend a grateful thanks to those who generously contributed to the building fund a few years ago and for their understanding and patience when the funds had to be used for running costs. Thanks to small grants and donations we have been able to recoup most of this money and intend to start building early in 2013. We want to move the toddler's class out of the dormitory of the Halfway House so it can be used for its original intention which is the caring and training of HIV+ children who are sick due to defaulting on the ARV drug regime. The second classroom in the new building will be used for skills training for the older children in the support group. To give them an advantage in the employment market we will include a computer laboratory and sewing room. The two rooms will be divided by a "concertina" type folding wall which we can fold back when we need a larger hall.

I visited a site in Mpumalanga Province to see an environmentally friendly house being built. Bags the size of small pillow cases are filled with river sand, packed between wooden struts and covered with wood or cement cladding. The sand keeps the building cool in summer and warm in winter. The concept was originally designed for low cost housing and the package includes training of a local supervisor. This will provide an income for the HIV+ support group as they will be paid for filling the bags. Building this way will not only show the community a better way of construction but the quote for materials, labour and training is approximately a third of the price quoted to build in the conventional method! Also, this trained group of workers will be part of another income generating project as they assist local people with low cost housing. Oxfam, our funders for the outreach program, unfortunately do not assist with buildings but have promised to pay for the training of the supervisor and the wages for the sand packers as 'staff capacity building and income generating activities.'

WE THANK YOU...

After all these years I still get a thrill when I drive through the school gates every day. Getting my morning hugs from the children as they scamper past my office and warm greetings from my staff is equivalent to a daily dose of love. How privileged I am to be the captain on this incredible voyage and we wouldn't have been able to do it without your assistance.

Grateful thanks to all of you from the VMS team. With your generous support, we are transforming our community.