

Celebrate What's Right with the World

Many years ago, when volunteer meetings were held in our lounge, we watched an amazing DVD featuring a National Geographic photographer named Dewitt Jones. His whole philosophy is to celebrate what's right with the world and in doing so find the energy to fix what is wrong with it. As we end this 10th year of service we are going to do exactly that - celebrate what is right with OUR world

We could of course celebrate the number of teachers trained, the dozens of schools we partner, the thousands of children we feed each day or the millions of meals served since we started. All of these are wonderful positives about the work . However today I want to celebrate some wonderful people who, in Dewitt Jones's words, "Seek not just to be the best in the world, but to be the best for the world".

One of the key challenges that Dewitt talks about is being "open to possibilities". Believing that possibilities are there, even if we can't initially see them - Believing precedes seeing! This year much of our focus has been on providing e'Pap to very vulnerable children. We have been able to partner with a number of township ladies. ladies who have been motivated by someone in our project or ladies who have, simply off their own bat, seen the need and worked to fix it.

We have been open to the possibility of caring for many children who are not able to go to pre-school and for some who are HIV positive and in doing so discovered some heroes. Here are just two we can celebrate today:

Sina at Pakamani started taking children into her home. On my first visit she said she wanted to help them speak Afrikaans because the children would be going to an Afrikaans Primary school. She also wanted to provide a Christian "home" for them. The atmosphere was one of such love and care. Eventually she was bursting at the seams and her hubby put up another "building" for her school. We have since been able, Rotary and her husband, to start the process of cladding the walls, putting glass into the window frames and erecting a fence to keep the children in and the animals out. She had, and still has, a vision of what she wants for the children in her area and is doing something to bring that to fruition.

Sina is what is right with the world and we celebrate her

Conia had been teaching at one of our schools, but had to leave. Undaunted she started taking children into her home. She just loves the little ones and soon her numbers grew and grew. She added a shack and this was dark and filled to capacity. Our e'Pap volunteer was approached by a donor friend who wanted to help her by

adding on a new room. Preparation and getting permissions caused the months to roll by and she continued to cram all her children into one tiny, dark room and wait patiently. She never gave up hope. Eventually in September the new little school was finished and there was a grand opening. She was delighted.

Conia the principal, Julie the volunteer, the donor and the builder - all these people are what is right with our world and we celebrate the whole diverse team.

Through our Fixit Fund, our wonderful volunteers, together with partners like Rotary and KET, we have been able to support many teachers this year with building operations, tables and chairs, educational equipment, and beautifully covered mattresses.

There are, of course, many other "Sinias and Conias" waiting patiently and believing that there are possibilities for them too. I think of Cynthia at I Linga Lom, who has waited for years for her new building always believing that she would eventually get it. Through a partnership with KET and others this has come to fruition and she is like the cat who got the cream. There are so many positive people who love children and a desire to make things better by nourishing and educating them, despite the many obstacles. Our opportunity to serve would not exist if it were not for these heroes.

There have been examples of husbands of our volunteers giving of their time and expertise to help improve schools, in this way encouraging teachers to continue doing what they are doing.

When we first visited this little shack at Sophakama Playschool, there was not even a table to mix the e'Pap on. We did it sitting on the floor. The leaky roof sheets were held up with tree branches and the walls were clad with cardboard to keep the wind out. With the help of two wonderful husbands, the volunteer's husband and the teacher's, this has been transformed. The building has been extended, clad inside, new roofing to replace the one with holes in it is on and I believe they have just been given wood for a floor. Such joy has been experienced by both the giver and the recipient.

So, these husbands are what is right with our world.

And what have our donors been up to this year?

Earlier this year 4 members of the GRCT walked 200 miles from coast to coast across Britain. This took 13 days, sometimes 20 miles a day, through the most difficult terrain, boggy ground into which they sank knee deep, pouring rain and of

course through some beautiful scenery too. They raised £13,000 for the vulnerable children of the Garden Route.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have children who collect their pocket money for e'Pap and little ones who come on holiday to Knysna and can't wait to visit some of the schools and share easter eggs or make puzzles together and all those in between.

We are truly blessed by these folk who come in all shapes, sizes and ages. What they have in common is that they share our vision and passion and help us serve.

Small groups

One of the things we felt worked really well this year was the 4 small group meetings held at our home. We were able to get to know each other a bit better and address situations in the schools which is difficult to do in a large group like this. e.g. one of our volunteers was always saddened by a few children looking longingly through the fence at the children attending the pre-school. Rather than shed a tear and just feel sad, she mentioned this to a friend who very generously offered to cover the pre-school fees so that these little ones could go too. The children are doing so well. Here someone saw the possibility of changing these children's lives, perhaps for good and did something about it. What a fantastic gesture on both parts.

Other things shared were relationships built over time, by the volunteer supporting and "spoiling" a principal who was struggling. Really providing a listening ear and caring for that principal or teacher. This drew them closer and made such a difference. We discussed a few difficulties with schools needing educational equipment and stimulation and the volunteer not being sure whether to get involved or not. We were able to give time and input from several people in chatting about situations like this.

We had about 37 people altogether over 4 weeks and each morning culminated with tea and scrumptious eats and a chance just to "kuier" and get to know someone we hadn't met before. Perhaps we will do it again.

One of the lovely celebratory events this year was Mandela day. Many of the schools participated. It was such fun to see Karin and the children of Wonderland marching down the main road in the township handing out pictures of our flag and Madiba which they had coloured in. Passers by were stopped and given a picture. They then continued on their merry way back to school, singing and laughing.

Some of the High School boys made chocolate e'Pap pudding and delivered it to a nearby crèche. Not only did they make and deliver it but helped to feed the little ones too. It was a most heartwarming event which had some of us in tears.

A magic moment during the year for me, was when I took a young Swiss girl to visit some of our schools. I watched her and a teenage boy at Hornlee High standing together and chatting while he ate his e'Pap. They came from worlds apart, one from a poor home with only a Mum to support him and the other from a fairly wealthy one thousands of kilometers away. As they chatted Ricardo said he had come to get his e'Pap before going on a job shadowing appointment and explained that because of e'Pap he was learning so much better. My aim, he said, is to make my Mum proud of me.

Without hesitation, Anna from Switzerland, said "I feel exactly the same. That is what I want."

I believe our teachers and volunteers are being the best FOR our world here in the Garden Route, by giving of themselves and their abundance to enrich the lives of our children. We never know where our contribution may lead. Who knows, maybe one day one of our children may be President of SA.

As we come to the end of an amazing 10 years, I would like to thank each and every one of you for faithfully serving your school/pre-school/ place of care so well. As we have said so often, you are the backbone of our project and without you, our children would not be nourished.