

Suitcases for Africa

Annual Report 2010

There has been much to celebrate this year at Suitcases for Africa (SFA) as our small grassroots organisation became an official Registered Canadian Charity in the summer of 2010. Formed in 2006 in memory of the late **Dr. Ebi Kimanani Johns** who passed away tragically of malaria in the winter of 2005, the organisation flourished because it was taken up and into the generous hearts and minds of her Canadian community.

Conceived of initially as a simple trip to aid Ebi's Kenyan Village of Itegero by members of her church, local school teachers and community members, it has since grown into a project we could never have imagined. Moved to honour Ebi's memory by assisting her Kenyan homeland, the group, sometimes known as The Kenya Girls, set off in 2006 with the medical and school supplies that were so generously donated. It was our wish also to share our stories of Ebi with her family and community. It was a powerful and moving experience. The group returned with many stories of hardship, poverty, illness, hunger, lack of water and a seemingly endless procession of orphans in dire circumstances. However, we also came back with stories of courage, warmth, joyfulness, and hope where none was evident. Empowered by our experiences and now carrying these good people in our hearts and minds we began to share these stories.

The community response back home in Canada was immediate and on - going. Slowly but surely momentum to affect change for good began to grow. Feeding programs began, libraries and classrooms were stocked and furnished, wells and water - harvesting projects were realised and it became evident that Suitcases for Africa was a direct pipeline for channelling aid and development right to the heart of Kenyan communities in need. There was a sense of ``we can do this `` and we can do it directly. This bypasses unnecessary bureaucracy and prevents loss of funds due to corruption and waste, as is often the fear of many donors. SFA built up a trusted team of dedicated assistants and administrators on the ground in Kenya made up of clergy, medical personnel and teachers who are working among those most affected by poverty. They inspired us in their work with those suffering from illnesses such as AIDS, malaria, typhoid and TB and a lack of even the very basics for human life and dignity. In 2007 Suitcases for Africa was born officially as a constitution was drawn up and an official board was elected.

In 2010 a new cornerstone for the organisation was laid with Charitable Status having been granted to assist us in this work and to recognise the charitable giving of wonderful supporters who have made it all possible with their donations. We thank our donors for their faith in us and their on - going support and are happy we can now give them tax receipts for their part in this work. We also appreciate the growing number of volunteers who have been taking up special projects and raising funds to see them come to be realised.

On the ground in Kenya, 2010 has been a year of transformations that have warmed our hearts and given new hope to many. Our visits to the communities we were introduced to in Kenya in 2009 were often very emotional with the discovery of some very destitute situations. We were often in new communities that were extremely precarious, where hunger was a national emergency due to a long drought and many we met were suffering. It made our return home a difficult transition as we assessed our projects and made plans to help in 2010. Happily the Canadian community rallied around swiftly to set life changing projects in motion.

Perhaps the single most inspiring transformation in 2010 came about at **The Mukumu Children`s Home**. Discovered by SFA in 2009, it is home to 35 orphans and abandoned children. These children were rescued from some very dire circumstances including abandonment, starvation, untreated illness, rape, physical abuse, use as slave labour and exposure to all manner of hardships before they were rescued. Though now in a safe environment and receiving some trauma counselling and patchy medical care, they still had no place to sleep except huddled together on the cold ground. Food was never guaranteed. In 2009 SFA started an emergency food supplementation program and continued the plan right up until the fall of 2010 as SFA worked throughout the past year to make their circumstances more liveable.

A **Poultry Project** in late 2009 was the start of a one - year plan for **food sustainability** for **Mukumu Home**. Two cocks and twenty hens began contributing protein to the children`s diet and income from egg sales. Trained by an animal officer in good poultry management, the children now tend the project themselves. Next in line was the funding in March 2010 of seed, fertiliser and labour for the land around the home to be planted with maize, a dietary staple in the region that is used to make flour. Crops of various traditional vegetables such as sukumawiki, were also planted and tended by the children. A Suitcases for Africa team visiting the project in May 2010, saw the great new crops the land produced. The biggest transformation came about when a generous donor funded the complete overhaul of the home. Walls were knocked down and space improved to allow for two bright **new dormitory rooms** to be built and furnished with iron bunk beds, mattresses, donated sheets and mosquito nets. Each child now has a warm clean bed of their own. Our administrator **David Eshihuula** oversaw the whole project keeping us well advised and connected during the process. He also recommended the installation of **new, safer latrines** to be located further away from the home for better sanitation. With our support these were installed in 2010. Upon the arrival of the second SFA team in Kenya in July 2010 we were delighted to help with the final touches of painting and furnishing the dorms. New clothes, books and colourful cloth dolls that were hand - made by Canadian school children completed each bed and made the children very happy as we unpacked them from our many suitcases.

The last remaining challenge for Mukumu Home was a big one. The children still had no access to clean water and the trip to the river for unsafe water was still very difficult. The children often missed school to do this arduous chore and were at risk from predators at the river, both the animal and human varieties. Children suffer from many parasitic and waterborne illnesses in these poor communities. Many already suffer from the effects of AIDs and TB and the added burden of unclean water is a grave threat to their fragile health. So it was, in the fall of 2010, that five of the children in the home were gravely ill with Typhoid and hospitalised.

Fortunately, due to the efforts of fundraising events held in Canada, a well was funded. It was decided that a **community well** large enough to serve 500 people would be built in close proximity to the Mukumu Home to benefit many in this very poor community called **Lukhule**. It was completed the week before Christmas and bears a dedication to Dr. Ebi Kimanani. We at SFA are happy and full of new hope knowing the well will bring better health to all in 2011.

There was a second community the team visited in 2009 that also created a deep impression upon those who visited. It was a visit to the **community of Sacred Shrine**. It was there that we were profoundly moved and humbled by what we encountered. Warmly welcomed upon our arrival, we were led to a small desolate patch of dusty ground. There was only a small mud and dung structure which served as a makeshift "school" for their small children. A torn sheet held up by four poles was erected for us for our protection from the sun. We sat beneath it and listened to songs of hope and joy and prayers for our good health and safe journey. It was evident to all of us that food was scarce here and that the children had no spark and were lethargic from ill health and malnutrition. Despite the evidence before us there was a sense of pride that they had formed this group to help themselves and improve their situation together. We struggled with our own sadness as they spoke of their faith and their hope that the future would be better. How we hoped that would be true. As it turned out it was our last day of fieldwork. The unbroken, month long marathon of dawn until dusk visits, consultations and research was beginning to take its toll on all of us and we found ourselves quite spent physically and overwhelmed emotionally by such great need. The endless long line - ups of children we fed, and to whom we distributed books and mosquito nets, seemed to stretch forever. Exhausted, and in some cases sick, we had been there for only one month, while they always lived with this hardship. We were astounded at the courage of these people and their determination to overcome so many hurdles. It made us all the more cognizant of our role in telling their stories so help would find its way here somehow. Upon our return home in 2009 they were never far from our thoughts at SFA about how we might help this community.

In the early months of 2010 a Canadian family came forward to make a wonderful project happen. The sad loss of their father and grandfather, Rosario, prompted the Castrogiovanni family to fund a **community well** in his memory at one of our Kenyan communities in need. It was to be a momentous change for this small community at **Sacred Shrine**. It was a huge boost to the health and well-being of the group. It also created a new link to visits from healthcare workers from the **Diocese of Kakamega** who then brought with them good health and nutritional advice. Building upon this, SFA then funded a **Poultry Project** for the community as a means of generating income and food. The animal officer trained them in good management and the venture was a huge success, exceeding our expectations. Within a few short weeks the coop's original 20 chickens had exploded in size with 50 new chicks arriving quickly and the egg-laying going well. When the team visited in July 2010, a mere 12 months after the original visit, we were astounded at the major turn-around. The most telling detail for us was the condition of the children. Singing, dancing and running about with new energy like normal healthy children, they were a joy to see. It was powerful proof to us that getting a community up on its feet even in small ways can have a huge impact on their own ability to take it from there. A day of sharing in the joyful celebration made us wish all our donors could have been there with us. Fortunately the Castrogiovanni family were able to join us as they made the journey with us.

Giving a community a **self-sustaining project** is a very good way to help them begin their climb out of poverty and it bolsters independence. It returns their pride and energy and gives new hope. This year (2010) we have installed another **three poultry projects** in other communities such as **Lion Hill, Upendo**, and currently one being completed this December in **Emalindi**. The **Sewing Project** for women in **Kayhega**, started in 2009 still continues to operate. In addition, the profits from jackets made by the women and sold here in Canada, have made it possible for SFA to fund seamstress vocational training for two young women, named Phylis and also Lydia, who is deaf. When their training is completed in 2011 and 2012, SFA will donate a sewing machine to each girl upon her graduation so she will have a future livelihood filled with promise. We were delighted to learn the original women began to fashion new quilts in 2010 from the colourful cloth remnants. These quilts are now helping us raise funds back home in Canada. This is another example of how a project like this evolves and grows in time with initiatives of their own taking over.

Another 2009 project had been set up to assist with food sustainability - **The Emalindi Farming Project**. This project continued throughout 2010 to produce local traditional crops including maize, soy beans, ground nuts and millet. For this project Suitcases for Africa funded the purchase of fertilizer, good seed and farm tools. In July 2010 the team visited the large common plot planted with maize. The crop was nearing harvest. Fr. Paul Ndasiganwa, who first proposed this project to us in 2009, also showed us the millet growing in his parish plot which is given to the hungry in his community. It is a very nutritious food choice for this purpose.

Often times SFA will begin work in a new village or community with an **orphan feeding program** so that physical needs for food and then water are met first. If you are sick from hunger and ill from water-borne illness you cannot begin to see the way forward or have the energy for school or work. We are pleased to say that our original feeding programs at **Khayega, Emalindi** and **Mukumu Home** are now ending in December 2010 as progress has been made towards their own sustainability which is one of our main goals. Although it is with mixed feelings that we move on, it is important to do so and to recognise their own need to fly. It also enables us to help new communities. In so doing **we will have met our goals to assist them with support in education, nutrition and healthcare.**

The **community of Kayhega** will have new support from SFA in the form of **Educational Sponsorships for orphans and vulnerable children** in 2011. These sponsors will assist a child at risk to stay in school and change the trajectory of their lives. They will receive a school uniform, new shoes, all school supplies and exam fees and be linked to one meal a day. We received an immediate response from our Canadian communities for funding this project. We thank the sponsors who signed up this December for the first 26 children to start the program. We hope to continue to build this program in 2011. We have also now funded **Hearing Aids** for 24 vulnerable or orphaned children to aid them in school in another educational program started in 2010.

During the July 2010 visit the team visited three new communities in the Kakamega region. **Chevoso, Shamberere, and Shitochi** and they will now become the locations for our **new feeding programs** to begin operating in January 2011. As with our previous programs the orphans and their caregivers are struggling to survive. They are experiencing hunger from food shortages, lack of schooling and healthcare. They are also facing a myriad array of social problems. HIV/ AIDS is highly prevalent in this area. The community's close proximity to a large sugar cane facility is both a blessing and a curse for the community and especially the children. The factory provides much needed work for the region but also brings in transient workers and long distance truckers who have nowhere to go in the long periods of waiting to load and unload cargo. As a result illegal drinking and fighting and abuse plagues the nearby communities. It threatens their safety and contributes to the spread of AIDS. Despite such formidable odds these three small groups have banded themselves together to set up small mud and dung structures to give the children a safe place to learn during the day. Manned by volunteer teachers who are full of enthusiasm, they are a lifeline to the community and a gathering place for them as they work to improve their lives and climb out of poverty. SFA spent time at each place giving out hundreds of books and school supplies to support that initiative.

Each of these three community groups will now begin to receive various staple foods to supplement their diet which SFA funds at the monthly support and celebration days. On these days they will also receive anti - parasitic medicines and counselling from local healthcare workers. They will no longer be below the radar for receiving help. We cannot stress enough the good that comes from this link. We thank our donors for donating the teaching materials in 2010 and their support for these feeding programs, as they are the early foundation for work to be done here in the future.

Although we met and worked with many new communities in 2010 we did not forget our long-time friends and our connections to **Itegero Primary School** and **St. Ursula School for Disabled Children**. Working together with staff and administrators we have been continuing to build and **support better educational facilities** at both schools. **Itegero Primary** was funded for a **Library upgrade** and received many more new books this year. They also received funds to develop a **music program** and purchase musical instruments thanks to the initiative of a young woman in Canada named Hilary Adams who raised the funds using her own musical talents. We were thrilled to see the resulting new choir that has been formed and were privileged to see them perform during our visit in July. On the day we arrived in the village of Itegero, the school had already been closed for the day and the students were already walking home. We had planned to stay overnight nearby and visit the following day. However, once the van was spotted in the streets, we were quickly engulfed in a sea of 700 children. Their pure joy and exuberance was astounding as they knew from past experience that we would be bringing them hundreds of much loved books! It was a slow crawl back to the school where, refusing to go home, they all sat down on the grass to patiently wait for the books. The teachers had no choice but to start right there and then. During our talks and presentations at home in Canada it is wonderful to share that with Canadian children and show them how much the books they have donated are loved and valued. Itegero Primary also received funding for the building of **new latrines** for the school which is essential for good sanitation and better health.

We called upon many Canadians in 2010 to knit blanket squares for us in a project we planned for making blankets with disabled children at **St Ursula Special School**. It was a delight here in Canada as hundreds poured in from near and far. Senior citizens in particular knitted up a storm in many senior's residences. Canadian "snowbirds" wintering in Florida also delivered box loads. Choir members, prayer groups and individuals knitted them in every color imaginable. The joy was doubled when we arrived at St. Ursula and began sewing them with our young friends. Despite the fact that many of the children had stiff and malformed hands they were determined to do this and the silence in the room as they persevered was evidence of their concentration. The silence was punctuated from time to time by outbursts of laughter or shrieks of delight as the squares came together and their blankets took shape. Not even the lunch bell could stop them from pursuing the task with pure delight. It was a day we all shall never forget as we worked with them on a project that touched so many Canadian supporters back home.

There is one last report to make on events in 2010. Last but not least was a very important new link that was made this year to the communities we assist in Kenya. It is a link that will have far reaching results and save many lives in the future.

In May 2010 two SFA members, Wendy Buchanan and Mary Morgan made a whirlwind 7 - day visit to the Kakamega region to introduce clinics and hospitals we have earmarked for help in the region to the representatives of a Canadian company wishing to send medications to Africa. Visiting the poorly -stocked, ill- equipped, run - down dispensaries and seeing first -hand the suffering that resulted was instrumental in making this link come about. Sadly the team and the company representatives were present when a mother arrived at one clinic only to have her 8 year old daughter die in their presence. If the medicine she needed had been available she need not have died. It was a powerful example of how we in Canada can share our resources and help make change happen thousands of miles away. We can help avert such tragedies by linking those companies who have the life-saving medicines they lack.

Since that visit several containers of antibiotics and antiretroviral medications have been delivered to those community hospitals and clinics we support and they ARE making a huge difference. In July we visited with our dear friend **Sr. Bernadette** who works in the slums of **Kisumu** in a small clinic called **Pandepieri**. She is surrounded by what to us is "hell on earth." She works tirelessly for the people she loves who struggle in this place even as her own health is deteriorating alarmingly since our last visit. In her lovely Irish lilt and in her gentle way she told us how the first shipment of medicine had arrived weeks before and the amazing healing benefits it was causing. She shrieked with complete delight upon opening the suitcases of medical supplies donated to her by Canadian doctors, companies and the West Island Palliative Care Center. It is proof once more that SFA is a good pipeline for making these important links thousands of miles away. We thank all of you who have joined together in 2010 in so many generous and innovative ways to use your talents and ideas and energy to make this all possible. In returning to my opening statements in this report, who could ever have imagined that all this would come about when a few women with suitcases set out on a simple journey to honour a friend? Ebi Kimanai's life, though far too short, has been the catalyst for much outpouring of love and support to those most in need in her homeland, and for that we thank you, the good people of her adopted home Canada.

Yours sincerely,

Darlene Anderson

President, Suitcases for Africa