

Suitcases for Africa Annual Report 2013

As the final days of 2013 wound down we took a look back at a year that saw several ongoing multi-year projects finally come to fruition. This was due to careful planning and the combined efforts of all those involved on both continents. Not the least of those committed, were our donors and friends who made these positive gains possible for those in Kenya struggling to obtain the very basics needed for a healthy productive life.

It was a year full of happy transformations, triumphs for sponsored children and some heartbreaking tragedies. We experienced it all within our Kenyan projects. We shared both the joys and the sorrows of our Kenyan friends, administrators, colleagues and the communities we served. There were many happy days of celebration in various communities and Wendy and Michele were able to take part in them in September of 2013.

However, along with the rest of the world, we also shared the pain of the Kenyan people during the days-long attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi. Our visiting SFA team of Wendy & Michele were in Kenya at the time of the attack and had only left Nairobi to travel to the projects a mere 48 hours before. The nation was in shock. Fortunately our team was well cared for and felt very safe and secure with our colleagues in the western region. It only emphasized again the fragility of the life in many places around the world. We will continue to focus on all the good work taking place knowing that education, caring and compassion are the best tools we can use to make the world a safer, kinder place. We must not let go of our goals and commitment in the face of terrorists. Hope must remain primary.

On the following pages we will share with you all that has taken place in this year of great challenges and great changes.

Emalindi Orphan Hostel

The early days of 2013 found us celebrating the amazing transformation that had taken place at the Emalindi Orphan Hostel. We have been working extensively in this community for several years now. It is one of the poorest regions in rural Kenya, with the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS. Much help is needed there.

We learned of the plight of the 70 homeless children and orphans during our visit to the region in 2011 when the great famine that was ravaging east Africa. The “Sisters of Mary” nuns were trying to cope with feeding the children and housing them. The building which served as a dormitory for the girls was a dilapidated structure. The roof leaked and water seeped in under the walls. It pooled onto the floors where most of the children slept.

There were only a few broken beds, a few old worn mattresses and a few blankets. Two collapsing overfilled latrines and a bathing area made with cobbled together rusty tin sheets completed the facilities. Food was available only when it could be found in the community which was also suffering from hunger and had little to spare. It seemed an overwhelming situation.

Over the following year we funded emergency food deliveries, set up a poultry-raising project and installed 4 hygienic new latrines. In January 2013 with the funds raised by our donors the orphan hostel dormitory was completely renovated. It was transformed into a safe, weather proof and comfortable home for the girls. A new roof, large bright windows, two large exit doors, new floors and a water proof foundation made it safe and warm. New iron bunk beds and mattresses were delivered and the interior and exterior walls were painted in bright, cheerful colours. 2013 was off to a great start! It was SFA's third orphan dormitory overhaul.

Suitcases for Africa's Feeding Programs

During the September 2013 visit, the team was delighted to see that the children in our 3 feeding programs at Shamberere, Chevoso and Shitochi were showing the benefits of the extra nutrition and deworming medications they had been receiving over the last 3 years. Looking healthy, energetic and happy, they sang and enjoyed their monthly celebration with Susan and Esther who oversee the program for SFA.

It was a vast improvement from the initial days when we first met the children. It is our hope in 2014 to fund an income generating program for each of these groups so they can graduate to self-sufficiency, and be able to fund food for their children independently. That is always the end goal once they are in better health.

SFA continued through-out 2013 to also fund emergency food to various schools or institutions as well when possible. Among those receiving food during the year were the special needs children at St. Ursula School in Chamakanga and St. Joseph the Worker in Malava. Itegero Primary School also received funding for the level 8 students who enjoyed a daily school lunch program to improve their health and strength during their final year when they write government exams in order to graduate.

Community Based Development Projects

The Sacred Shrine Community Posho Mill

By the end of 2013 the Community of Sacred Shine was also showing the tremendous benefits that were built up over several years of commitment by SFA. The sustainability approach was used to improve their situation by funding community based projects funded by our donors to improve lives. It broke our hearts when we met the members of Sacred Shrine community in 2009 due to the staggering poverty and ill health we witnessed there. The children were listless and unstimulated. The adults were also undernourished and unwell. Their only source of water was contaminated, parasite-infested river water hauled from distant sites.

Over ensuing years, SFA first prioritized the installation of a new community well which was funded by a family in memory of their late father. The plentiful clean water had an immediate and dramatic effect upon their health. Six months later the sight of healthy looking, energetic and playful children was evidence enough! This was accompanied with a community poultry-raising project and the donation of educational supplies and books for the young children so they could enjoy stimulating activities each day.

2013 saw the start-up of a new and exciting project funded by a donor from Italy in memory of his late father. The project involved the building of a Community Posho Mill. This is a facility where families go to grind their maize into flour. It is run by a community member who is trained to operate the equipment. He is compensated for his work running the mill and all profits from the business are put toward funding a feeding program for the youngest children through an early childhood program. They are already running a profit with a very good outlook for the future. This is another community now well on their way. Another good reason to celebrate in 2013 as this project came into fruition on a community level.

The Cow Project

There was much joy and excitement throughout 2013 as SFA's Maisha Mapya Cow Project was also completed over the course of the year. This project was set up in 2011 for the self-help group called Maisha Mapya. It was set up by widows and widowers with HIV/Aids as a means to support themselves and their children. There is still great stigma in Kenya towards those infected with HIV/AIDS and many feel the sting of marginalisation. The Swahili words "Maisha Mapya" mean "New Life" It was chosen by the members and symbolizes their hope.

By forming into small support groups the members encourage one-another "to live positively". They are a great example to others in the community and help to lessen the stigma by their efforts and example. We wanted to assist this positive group initiative. With the experience, compassion and guidance of our administrator Susan the group has blossomed.

Thanks to our donors the project was completed in 2013 in a much quicker time frame than we had initially expected. All eight sub groups are now the proud owners of a cow which they care for in collective groups of five members. The cows have been producing healthy new calves throughout the year with two more recently being born between Christmas and the New Year. Each calf born is given to another member of the small group and this will continue until each member has a cow of their own.

The milk nourishes their children and the extra is sold for income. Over time this will become a small business to support their families. The project inspires hope for their futures instead of despair over their HIV status. We received letters from the women describing, in their own words, how this has changed their lives. The letters touched us deeply. You can read more about all of these projects and enjoy photos in our 2013 Newsletters found on our website at suitcasesforafrica.com.

Joshua's Well

One of our most exciting projects in 2013 was the completion of a community well which was funded by the perseverance and determination of a seven year old boy named Joshua. Joshua inspired his school, his church, and his whole community here in Canada by his compassionate efforts. Francis Scarpaleggia, Joshua's Member of Parliament, stood and spoke about him in the House of Parliament and sent him best wishes in a framed statement, a copied version of which made it all the way to Kenya!

Joshua even inspired a well-known Los Angeles movie producer and philanthropist, Tom Shediak, to match his fundraising dollar to dollar..... a remarkable achievement for one so young. The well was completed in the community of Kafode Kenya.

The well is located at the Kamuchisu Dispensary where the community celebrated Joshua's gift to them. They too are incredulous and very proud of young Joshua. With the help of his friends and family Joshua is working his way toward a second well as more and more people join his cause. This was a definite highlight of the year for everyone at SFA!

The Beraldo Family Medical Centre

Due to the ongoing commitment and support of the Beraldo family of Toronto, the community of Emalindi is enjoying the benefits of having access to good medical care close at hand for the first time in the lives of many of the 6,000 people it assists. Funded and equipped by the family in 2012, the Centre has now begun the process of doing community health outreach clinics. In 2013 Healthcare workers went out to schools in the community to identify those in dire need of treatment for “jiggers” Jiggers are tiny parasites which burrow into the feet or any other part of the body in contact with the soil. They lay their eggs under the toenails or the skin where the eggs then hatch. Painful and debilitating wounds and the ensuing infections and damage can render the child or adult incapable of normal daily activities. Endemic in rural Kenya, whole communities can be incapacitated by this tiny parasite. Hundreds were treated in the two separate clinics that were conducted. Their homesteads were sprayed to combat the problem. Simple flip-flop shoes can prevent re-occurrence once healed. Hundreds were also treated for ringworm.

Another reassuring outcome of this centre is the improved mother and baby healthcare now available. Women need no longer travel long distances to reach care for any complication or difficult delivery. In the past this sometimes necessitated a mother in labour and in distress being taken by motorbike to hospital. The outcome of this was often fatal for one or both. Babies are now also being vaccinated and simple testing for Malaria is saving lives. We know 2014 will bring more development of the clinic and its outreach potential to save more lives and lessen suffering.

SFA's Educational Projects 2013

It has been a very productive year for the educational projects, which we are very certain, will bring new possibilities for the many children who now benefit from this funding. We are very proud of the 40 sponsored students in 2013. Most have worked very hard at school despite often extremely difficult home situations. Long walks to get to school and household or work related chores still eat into their time to study. These are chores such as hauling water or searching for firewood or caring for siblings. The students realize the chances they are receiving to create a future for themselves and their families. Thanks to their Canadian sponsor each child received a school uniform, shoes, school supplies, and books. In addition all school and exam fees were paid for.

The benefit of having one good meal a day funded for them made a huge difference in their ability to study and absorb what they learned. That is not possible on an empty stomach which is the sad reality for most vulnerable children. Eleven more sponsors have stepped forward to increase the group to 51 students in 2014.

Educational Materials and School Upgrades

Providing schools with books and school supplies continued to be a priority in 2013. Upgrading the often crumbling and deteriorating school structures themselves was another must on our list. In September the visiting team took with them hundreds of library books and school supplies. Both are in short supply or completely non-existent in many schools. Complete team soccer uniforms and soccer balls delighted the school staff members almost as much as the students. They are rare and unaffordable at most schools. These items for sports programs were a huge morale boost to the schools who received them. The school thank you letters were a joy to read and a reminder of how much we take for granted.

St. Paul's Primary School in Mwirembe had a facelift in 2013. The school was painted the much-loved blue we see so often in Kenya. It will help to prolong and preserve the mud brick walls and also served to boost the spirits of staff and students. We were pleased by the donation of paint from a local Kenyan business obtained by our administrator David.

The Shanyinya Educational Project continues to unfold and improve each year. Funded by a donor and his friends and family in 2013, they were able to supply all 50 children in the fledgling early childhood program with school uniforms and shoes in early 2013. A further donation in autumn by the donor group enabled the purchase of desks and chairs for all. The smiles on their faces told the story of their happiness at no longer sitting on the ground to work!

Proud new Graduates in 2013

Those of you who have been following the progress of our 3 High School Scholarship students will be pleased to learn that they have graduated! Kevin & Celestine were funded by the 4 year "Man-Man High School Scholarship". Lydia who has been funded in a Seamstress Program through High School has also graduated. Lydia, who is hearing impaired, was funded to attend a School for Hearing Impaired Girls in Mumias. She received a brand new sewing machine upon graduation and is now about to enter a "Sheltered Sewing Workshop" for Disabled Workers.

There she will have support in her first year as she gains practical experience and clients. SFA has funded Lydia's start-up supplies and material to help get her business running. This is a huge opportunity for Lydia. Her history is one of great hardship and sadness. Lydia lost both her parents to AIDS while still in Primary school. When we met Lydia, while visiting the projects in 2009, she was living in a small mud home by herself. She was attending school only sporadically due to her fragile situation. We are delighted to see her achieve this goal! We see the triumph of these 3 students who achieved their education against the odds because of the generosity of SFA donors.

SFA Support for Disabled Children in 2013

Disabled children are the MOST vulnerable children in Kenya. These children are often marginalized and forgotten by the community. Usually found case by case during the visits being carried out by community healthcare workers, these children are often in dire situations. They are sometimes abused, sometimes locked away due to the shame felt by those who have not been educated to see their value in the society. These children hold a very special place in the hearts of all of us at SFA. Once rescued and placed into a good institution for rehabilitation they can become extremely loving children who can learn a trade in many cases. They are very affectionate children who enjoy it when we come to see them as they get very few visitors. Their laughter and their expressive gestures warm us to the core. We cherish these visits and they are among the days we love most at the projects.

SFA has been funding and supporting 2 Institutions that are doing the best they can with the very limited resources available to them. The government does not place these children highly in the scheme of things and even food can be hard to obtain to feed them. We fund emergency food regularly when the government supply has run out and nothing is forthcoming. We have witnessed Josephat the caring director of **St. Ursula School** cry as he described his frustration in obtaining food. These children in particular require good nutrition. Due to their special needs or conditions these children often require special diets. Many of the children at St. Ursula have intellectual or physical disabilities and we are impressed with the love and attention they receive from their caregivers. We are proud to fund them as much as we can.

In 2013 we also received a request to help with clothing for the children. Their uniforms were in tatters. We were able to fund new uniforms and sweaters for the 300 children who live in the dormitories. New blankets were also funded for warmth against the cold Kenyan nights.

The second institution we support is **St. Joseph the Worker** located in Malava. At St. Joseph there are some very severely disabled children. Some cases are resulting from difficult or unattended childbirth, some resulting due to complications from diseases like Measles, or Malaria. Sadly some also result from severe malnutrition in infancy. Some of the immobile children are now able to get around better and go outdoors in the wheelchairs which SFA brings over each year. In 2013 we also continued to fund medications for those children who suffer from epilepsy and seizures. These medications ease their suffering. Our visiting teams always bring stimulating toys and sports equipment for those who can benefit from the activities. This year the children were delighted to blow bubbles and the team spent a wonderful day with them enjoying such simple pleasures. Emergency food supplies were also prioritized for them. We have seen many of these children improve from year to year when we visit and are often surprised to see the gains they have made with this care and attention.

SFA's Farming Projects

Emalindi Small Plot Farms Project 2013

Commencing in 2009, SFA began to support small farm plots in the community of Emalindi, the site of several SFA projects to assist the extremely poor rural population. Fr. Paul Nsadaganwa, a local parish priest proposed the project for those who had small 2 acre plots of land they owned but were too poor to farm. SFA implemented a program supplying farm tools, fertilizer and seed to help them get their land planted. It began with the funding of maize and ground nuts (peanuts). Over the course of the following years as we learned more about superior crops such as millet and soya, the farmers were encouraged to plant those crops. They are more drought tolerant and more nutritious than maize. Gradually the farms began to rotate soy beans into the growing season. Maize is still the preferred food staple culturally, but more and more the benefits of soya are being recognized. Averaging 50 household per year sponsored, that number grew to 61 households in 2013 with a generous donor stepping in to fund the program.

The Banana Farm Pilot Project 2013

As mentioned above, the community of Emalindi is a place of hardship and insecurity. It is also the location of another SFA project... supporting Mwirembe St. Paul's Primary School which is attended by approximately 550 local children. Over the last few years, SFA has installed a well and 8 new latrines. SFA also built a beautiful large classroom for the level 8 class.

The yearly donations of school supplies and library books and the painting project of 2013 has done much to lift the educational level and morale of staff and students but there is still a huge worry to all of us at SFA. Hunger is a relentless problem here. The children come from very poor families and so many are malnourished and suffer because of it. One meal a day would make a huge impact on their health and ability to study at school. However, to fund a feeding program at this school of 550 would require more funds than SFA could muster. It is a problem we have been pondering over since our first visit there in 2011 when we saw the children and learned that many go to school all day with little more than tea and no food in their system until their return home for the daily meal.

In 2013 SFA learned from our administrator, David, about the Kenyan government's initiative to promote the planting of banana tree plantations. He attended a seminar in Nairobi to learn more about this possibility. It was necessary to determine the projects suitability and learn more about the fast-growing tissue culture plantlets available and the process to follow to ensure a successful harvest.

We have hope that this may be a good solution for the hunger problem for the children. The fast growing plants will mature in one year and bear fruit.

The productive and nutritious bananas would be available for the children to eat. If the plantation was then enlarged, the excess fruit could be sold. With the income generated by selling bananas, the school could then purchase staples of maize and beans to support a feeding program. The plants would be tended by the older children and staff under the guidance and training of a field extension officer to begin with. Proper applications of fertilizers, mulching and watering will be supervised. SFA has agreed to fund a pilot project of 100 banana plants to determine the project's viability. If successful we would move forward with the second phase if funding allows in 2014.

In September the project kicked off with the older children working and involved in preparing the large tract of land surrounding the school. Very large deep holes were dug to receive the plantlets. SFA received the photos of the children and saw their evident excitement at being part of this project.

Then came news of a tragedy that moved us all to tears and reminded us of how hard life is for those children we assist.

One of the young girls who had been involved in the planting preparations was Loice. Fourteen year old Loice left school one day to return to her home as usual. Feeling very hungry she detoured into the forest to search for some fruit in order to tame her hunger even though knowing the fruit was still un-ripened. While searching, Loice found a dead bird on the forest floor. She took it home, prepared it, cooked and ate it before her family returned. Tragically Loice was taken very ill almost immediately. Within 3 hours of consuming it, Loice was in a hospital fighting for her life. Everything possible was done to save her but to no avail. Loice passed away. It was determined that the bird she had consumed was killed by a poisonous snake and that the poison in its carcass is what took her life. How can we in Canada even conceive of such a thing? Life is fragile. There are no safety nets for the vulnerable.

This event was heartbreaking for the family, school, community and SFA.. We sent our condolences and our prayers to the community. We also requested to name the Banana Tree Project in memory of Loice in the hope that future children in this community will not need to view a bird found dead on the forest floor as a meal. We thank all those who have already donated to this project in 2013. We are happy to report the plants are now already 3 feet high and taking well.

We will feature this project along with photos in the first Newsletter of 2014. It will be available by email or by viewing on our website at www.suitcasesforafrica.com in late Feb. 2014. As our partners in this work, hopefully you may all follow the progress toward a sustainable feeding program for these children.

Within this 2013 Annual Report we have covered the highs and lows of our year at Suitcases for Africa. There were triumphs, transformations and tragedies for certain but we know that because of this work and your support, life is a little bit better for many in this corner of Kenya. We thank you for being partners on the journey. Without you none of this would have been possible. On behalf of all our members and volunteers we wish you and your families a great start in 2014 and look forward to its promise for those in Kenya,

Yours sincerely,

Darlene Anderson,

President, Suitcases for Africa