

# Suitcases for Africa Annual Report 2009

Suitcases for Africa is a small grass roots organization that is very committed to being active on the ground in the communities we assist in Kenya. We play an active and ongoing role in these communities to assist with the huge orphan crisis being experienced in the wake of HIV/AIDS, extreme poverty, food shortages and inadequate health and sanitation. We work in partnership with local administrators such as the Catholic Diocese of Kakamega, Community Healthcare workers and school administrators to carry out our projects. Unfortunately, in 2008 we were unable to visit our projects in person due to the violence and chaos of the post election clashes and unrest. For that reason 2009 was met with great excitement and planning by our members to return once again to the field. We were anxious to connect with our partners, friends and the children and to ascertain how they were coping with the ensuing difficulties of rebuilding and moving forward from the tragedy of the year before.

Our current secretary Charlotte Marcella lost no time in organizing a two month working visit to the Kakamega region beginning in mid January. Her plan was to follow up and report on our current and past projects and to research new and beneficial projects for aid and development. During her stay Charlotte had the great pleasure of commissioning the exciting water tower project at Chekombero School for the hearing impaired which was funded by SFA in 2008. This project was a roof top rain collection system that feeds into a large underground tank capable of holding 85,000 litres of rain water and a high water tower which is used for pressure. Charlotte shared in the joyful, colorful ceremony and felt the beneficial impact this project had made on the community.

Unfortunately, disaster was about to strike a few short weeks later. As is often the case in developing countries the people are affected by extreme weather conditions or natural disasters. In this case a fierce tropical storm tore through the region. The high winds and unrelenting rain leveled homes and destroyed crops.

At Chekombero School the roof of the girl's dormitory was torn off, disconnecting the pipes from the roof to the water tank. Not only were the girls exposed to the elements, the much needed rain water meant to be harvested in the rainy season was washing away. Fortunately, no students were injured and the tower stood strong. Our administrator David Eshihuula sought help from SFA for emergency funds to repair the damage. He found volunteer builders from a nearby trade school and with our funds a new roof was installed and the water system reconnected. At the same time electricity was brought in to the school and now almost one year later all the area schools have been able to hook up into this system. This area had never had electricity before. It was a happy outcome in the end. The water tank continues to work well and benefit many in the community.

During the course of Charlotte's research she met with many groups and communities in the area. Two projects began to take shape in her mind. Though so many were good projects to serve the dire needs in the area, she selected The Mukumu Children's Home and a proposed Farming Project in Emalindi where SFA currently sponsors a feeding program for orphans & care givers. Upon her return to Canada, SFA members worked to assess these proposals and a second team of members was organized to follow up and implement these plans on the ground. In June-July a team of five traveled to Kakamega to work once more. Myself as president, Wendy Buchanan our treasurer and three young volunteers, Paige Wilson, Dawn Amber Hilton and Crissy McPhee ( a trained physiotherapist) set off accompanied by 28 suitcases which weighed in at one ton! The suitcases contained hundreds of brand new donated library books for all of our schools, four Physician Travel Packs containing \$20,000.00 worth of much needed medicine, hospital sheets, clothing, teddy bears and sports and physiotherapy equipment. The medical packs were obtained through Health Partners International and funded by donations.

During the long days of work we distributed mosquito nets, also funded by Canadians. We personally handed out over one thousand of these treated nets to local community groups in need as researched by our administrator Susan Nanjala, and Sr. Agnes Khati, the medical director of the Kakamega Diocese.

In total 3,200 nets were purchased locally and distributed with our funds. Thank You Canada! Malaria kills and disables millions of children every year. Many of the children we assist at the hearing impaired and disabled schools we support are there as a direct result of Malaria and its side effects. We saw only too well the toll this disease exacts on the people. We had the sad experience of visiting with the family and community at Tirimas School who tragically lost a little girl this May ( just weeks before our arrival) whom we supported and loved. Her name was Gertrine and many Canadians knew of her and her courage when we told her story in 2006. She was gone in 3 days, too soon, and so unnecessarily. A simple net or an unaffordable \$7 treatment could have saved her life. We grieved with her family and community.

As we distributed the contents of our suitcases we especially enjoyed visiting the different schools we support to donate new books for their libraries. The children ran from their classrooms to engulf our van each time as they knew the books were arriving with us! They would help us unload and then promptly sit down and read with pure delight. Along with the books came projects written by Canadian students to tell them about life in Canada, our winter sports, Canadian animals etc. Beautiful artwork and paintings on canvas for the dormitories and libraries also brought much joy. You could see the connection being made between our two countries in the smiles on their faces.

We had the pleasure of seeing our feeding programs at Emalindi and Kayhega and sharing in the work of the day. Long lineups of children were served bread and juice and received the food supplements SFA provides of beans, rice, flour, sugar and cooking oil. We also helped administer anti parasitic medicine. We could see the effects of these illnesses and were pleased that the medicine is given monthly because it is a constant struggle due to contaminated water and food. It was wonderful to see the happiness that came with the gift of teddy bears that had been knitted by women back home in Canada. We listened to songs and stories during the celebrations. Some made us laugh with their humor but more made us cry with the sadness so many have to deal with from the loss of their beloved parents or siblings.

At Kayhega, we were inspired to see another of SFA's 2009 new programs working well. As one more step toward self sufficiency, SFA funded a work project for the impoverished caregivers of our orphans in this feeding program. We purchased 4 sewing machines and cloth for the women to make jackets. They learned this jacket pattern from a course given by another NGO operating in the area. They sewed 38 jackets while we were there to start up the business. We brought the jackets back to Canada to sell as a fundraiser. The funds SFA raised by their sale will be used to assist the group further by providing a seamstress scholarship to a young girl there. Phylis Atuka was chosen to receive funds to complete one year of training and graduate as a seamstress. Phylis had completed her first year studying when she had to drop out for lack of funds and to care for her younger siblings and cousins. She is the oldest of 11 children orphaned by the death of both of her parents and all 3 of her parents siblings due to AIDS. She will then be able to provide for her siblings and her elderly grandmother with her new job skills thus ending their dependency. This type of program has a far reaching positive effect on the whole family and extended relatives. Josephat Karani our administrator at St. Ursula Special School estimated that for every working Kenyan there are 10 dependants.

The Mukumu Children's Home was a place we spent as much time at as we could. It is a registered home for abandoned or rescued children. Many of the children were rescued from dangerous situations of rape, enforced child labor, or of physical abuse. Many of the children are HIV positive or have full blown AIDS and have been abandoned at hospitals due to the cost of their care and the extreme poverty of their parents. We have taken on this project to assist Grace Atieli, the director, to get this home up and running with improved conditions. There are currently 35 children who live there permanently. They all call Grace "MOM", she calls them her children. The numbers can fluctuate as high as 72 as the police and hospitals drop off more and more children until they can find them a safe place. The children all sleep in 3 bare rooms on the hard floor with no linens or blankets even though they are often sick. Opportunistic infections and parasitic illnesses plague them constantly. Finding food is always a problem for Grace. We began here in 2009 with emergency food funding. The children now receive daily nutritious meals through SFA.

Anti retroviral medication necessary to treat AIDS was denied to one very sick child there due to the need for the medication to be administered regularly with food. Once SFA established the food program she was allowed the medicine and is now much improved and doing very well. Grace also feeds one meal of porridge a day to 80 local, under nourished children which SFA funds. We are also excited to have built a chicken coop for the home .It was completed in November and now contains 20 hens (it can hold up to 50 )and two roosters , all of which are vaccinated and chosen by an animal officer to insure good stock. Through our funding of this project the girls in the home received a training course on how to care for and raise them successfully. They will soon begin laying eggs for food and there will also be another much needed source of protein in the meal. We will continue to support them with a garden planting project in 2010 to help them become self supporting in their food. We also hope to address the need for beds and linen and a possible dormitory should funds be available.

Hunger was declared a National Emergency in Kenya in 2009. We saw its effects everywhere we went in July. Three years of failed crops caused by unrelenting drought has devastated the region's food reserves. Food that can be found is unaffordable by most. It is estimated that 10,000,000 Kenyans could face starvation this year. ( Nairobi Daily Nation article.16,07,2009 ) It was evident to us at every school and every community we visited. Many do not eat even once a day. In addition to maintaining our food programs at Kayhega and Emalindi ( Enanga )we decided to increase our feeding programs in 2009 to include emergency food aid to The Mukumu Children's Home, St. Ursula Special School, and Checkombero School for the Hearing Impaired and to set up a lunch program for grade 8 students writing exams at Itegero School. A small one room kitchen was funded there where the daily meal of beans or corn and rice is cooked over a fire to feed those students At Itegero School we also funded new latrines for improved sanitation and installed a new water tank for rain collection. The students no longer have to make the long trek to the river to haul back parasite infested, contaminated drinking water for the school. This is a huge boost to improved health for these children

The final new project I wish to address in this year's report is the Emalindi Farming Program. During Charlotte's visit in January she met with a dedicated young priest in the region where we have our feeding program for Emalindi Group. ( Enanga ) . Fr. Paul is the parish priest for Emalindi and he was told when assigned to work there, that his mission was to assist the dying as so many face starvation and illness from AIDS. Although many have small tracts of land they could farm, they are too poor to buy seed and fertilizer and too ill to work the land alone. It was Fr. Paul who approached SFA during Charlotte's visit with his idea to form a cooperative farming project where with the help of our funds all could participate together and share their combined harvest. It is an admirable project, its aims being to increase food security and self sufficiency. This will enable our feeding program there to eventually be transformed into independence which is always our goal.

With this in mind SFA funded a start up project of 14 plots of land totaling 7 acres. The project was to assist 150 needy children from 45 households. In March 2009 we funded the purchase of good drought resistant seed, much needed fertilizer and farm tools. The beneficiaries worked the land as a team. It enhanced unity and a sense of ownership and was embraced by the community. During our visit in July we were very pleased at the success of this project and the hope it has instilled in the community. The first crop of beans saw 11 of the 14 plots do very well despite drought conditions. The second crop of corn was nearing maturity as we walked through the planted fields. It was astounding to us to see the difference in the crop yield in our project compared to the other poor failed crops in the nearby fields that had not been assisted with fertilizer and good seed. It was an emotional experience for us to see food growing where hunger stalked the population. Funds for a third crop of soya beans were provided in the fall for the last crop of 2009. We have the opportunity here to plant up to 50 acres and there are 150 more families who wish to join the program. It would be truly wonderful to make a start on that goal in 2010. The new year holds so much promise.

As we move into January, plans are already underway to drill a new well in a very impoverished community called Sacred Shrine. This well will be funded by the friends and family of the late Rosario Castrogiovanni and will be named in his memory. We are inspired by this loving gift which will improve the health and the lives of so many.

I cannot express in words alone the gratitude our organization feels towards all those who gave so much to see these programs bear fruit. On behalf of all our members I would like to thank you, our donors, and our many volunteers, for the privilege of doing this work on your behalf for it is you who make the difference and give hope where there is none. Thank you for caring so much.

Darlene Anderson,  
President, Suitcases for Africa