

Newsletter

Southern Hemisphere Winter
2007



A school in the making

It has been four and a half years since Beka was established to help Dorah Mokoena, almost blind and disabled from severe burns. Her family tried to find a school for her in government, but they found that no institution was able to meet Dorah's needs—so the Jo'burg School for the Blind was born.

The school building was donated to the Johannesburg School for Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children Trust by Margaret and Allan Hirsch. The first pupils were Dorah and a blind Sophiatown boy, Raez Kuhn.

Class room assistants and teachers underwent unique training to increase their empathy for blind children. This included finding their way

around the garden blind-folded. A herb garden was set up and a year after Beka was started Helene van Rhyn, now a trustee of the school, donated her large wooden jungle-gym to the school.

Twice a year holiday activity weeks were launched as a free service to the community, where children with or without disabilities, usually from disadvantaged backgrounds, came to enjoy theatre visits, arts and crafts, visits to the zoo, all under the note of educating about safety, tolerance and culture.

Blind SA soon stepped in to supply the school with Braille paper and a Braille machine; two more Braille machines came with Australian trustee Amelia Tandy,

donated by the blind school in Victoria in New South Wales. Another Braille machine was donated by the Bartimeus School for the Blind in the Netherlands, and brought over by volunteer low vision specialist Geerlande Homburg.

Children of Fire covered teacher costs and then the Dis-Chem Foundation helped from mid 2006.

Beka has grown thanks to sponsors, its director's determination, and compassion and empathy in those who helped to teach children with highly complicated disabilities.

Below: Nhlanhla Mpsi (6), blind since birth, presents a basket of blown Easter eggs hand-painted by sighted pupils as a thank you to Allan and Margaret Hirsch, donors of the school building.



Low vision pupil summits Mount Kilimanjaro:

Bongani Madlala (14), burned in a shack fire at the age of three months, battles with extremely low vision. Beka's sister charity Children of Fire identified his vision problems when he first came for help for his burn scars. He now wears strong glasses and has since learned how to read—he had reached grade four in a Howick primary school and no one had noticed that he



could not see! In June 2007, Bongani ascended Kilimanjaro alongside 18 other burns survivors and volunteers and as the youngest of the group he reached the impressive height of Stella Point on the rim of Kilimanjaro's crater, just 100 metres below the peak.

He said afterwards: "It was just an exercise for my legs, not that hard at all!" Bongani also schools at St Christopher's School in Pietermaritzburg when not in Johannesburg for medical matters.

Blind SA trains the Beka trainers in Braille

Thanks to Tracy Smith from Blind SA for Braille lessons on Monday afternoons. She also helps with arranging mobility training for Khaya Gxekwa (*see below*) and tries to help him with obtaining an ID. Blind herself, she uses a guide dog and the bus to get herself to

work each day, or her Dad gives her a lift. Blind SA also helps Beka with advice, and former Blind SA member Chrissie Muller previously also gave Braille lessons to volunteers, teachers and trustees.

Thank you for continuing support!



Tracy Smith photographed one sunny afternoon in Auckland Park.

No grant for Khaya, blind from hydrocephalus

Khaya Gxekwa (21) turned blind from hydrocephalus (*see insert*) when he was 17 years old and in grade 9. His shunt started to malfunction and the increasing amount of fluid in his brain put too much pressure on the optic nerve. He experienced permanent headaches and vision problems but his complaints were not taken seriously. When he woke up from another pressure-related seizure he found he had lost his eyesight.

Khaya cannot apply for a disability grant because Home Affairs have failed to issue his ID, almost two years after the initial application. His family will not take him to Beka on a regular basis and he lacks mobility training to use the bus by himself. He cannot afford to feed a guide dog so all that is left

*"I applied for Khaya's ID in September 2005. Almost two years on, it is still not ready."
- mother Sandra Gxekwa*

for him is to sit at home and listen to the radio. He recently received story tapes from an Australian well-wisher and even appeared on a local TV series. But once-off fun doesn't help.

Khaya needs transport so that he can get to our school regularly. If you live near Rosettenville and drive to the Auckland Park or Mayfair area daily, you could help this kind and bright young man to have a future. No high school wants to enrol him because of his age and lack of money. He wants to finish Matric but all that government offers for adults is Matric via correspondence—which is difficult for a young man who has not been to school for three years, except to Beka part time where we taught him the basics of Braille.



Hydrocephalus: A condition in which there is excess fluid in the brain that does not drain either due to obstruction of the ventricles or because it is not reabsorbed into the cerebral sinuses. It is dealt with by inserting a tube, or shunt, that leads the excess fluid to the abdominal cavity where it is absorbed.



Mareike Kirsch (16) struggled to fill in forms provided by her school, the Deutsche Schule Pretoria, for evaluation of her work experience. Mareike spent two weeks at Beka, and she could not think of how to describe "a typical day". In the short period of time she spent with us, she taught grade R and 1 pupils at the school, prepared lessons for the next Holiday Week, helped out by accompanying a child to hospital, and did some inspiring art work with all of the children. No two days were the same, and despite only being in grade 10, Mareike showed exemplary initiative and stamina.

We wish you all the best for the future!

Left: Rose, Feleng, Mareike, Sicelo, Karabo, Katrinky

Katrinky stuns with musical talent

Katrinah “Katrinky” Khanye (12) from the Newcastle area started at Beka in January 2007. Blind from glaucoma, she had never attended school until a family friend Riaan Cilliers referred her to us. She started with no English at all and no knowledge of the alphabet—two weeks after enrolment she knew the whole Braille alphabet; two months later she knew most of the contractions (abbreviations in Braille); today she is confident in English, reads and writes in Braille and can also play at several tunes on the piano which she taught herself from singing and listening attentively at the daily singing sessions.

13-year-old blind and multiply disabled pupil Dorah Mokeona enjoys being taken around by Katrinky, who, despite having only light stimulation, proves as a good guide for children who are less able than her.



Special needs teacher Abednigo Dube and Katrinky holding typed Braille

Katrinky has also befriended 14-year-old Rose Ndunda, a Kenyan burns survivor who visited South Africa for three months.

In mid-July, teacher Thatelo Nyathi and Rose travelled to Katrinky’s home to pay the family a visit and to accompany her back to school for the beginning of the next term.

Thatelo said: “Mr. Khanye has four children with his wife Dorah: three girls and one boy. He is a farm labourer who earns a meagre salary of R1000 a month. His wife is unemployed. Mr. Khanye owns nine head of cattle, 15 chickens, 12 goats and three horses.

Mr. Khanye is very appreciative, grateful and thankful of the progress shown by Katrinky (he was also thankful for us having visited the family). Frieda, a local farmer and artist, also extended her thanks to Bronwen. They said we should really come visit more often. Mr. Khanye said he is currently trying through people like Frieda to go to the newspapers at Newcastle, to make Katrinky’s story public, to thank Beka and at the same time referring other people with disabilities to the school.”

Convincing the family of the merits of education was not easy though. Katrinky’s brother is not in school.

Boipelo on trial

Boipelo Motheogane (14) came to Beka end May 2007 for a “trial week”, in which his needs and his educational level were assessed. At end July Boipelo was enrolled as a weekly boarder and his mother Judith is relieved that they finally found the right place for him.



Boipelo has low vision and also a hearing impairment. He did not perform well at his previous school but his teachers kept putting him into the next grade even though he was not coping with the work. Boipelo is a shy teenager and a little introverted; He can read and write a bit and his mathematics is already improving. We look forward to finding where his strengths lie. Boipelo does not socialise easily but he gets on well with Sizwe in particular.

Beka, builders and the sad seatless “Swing Saga”

What is it with Beka and builders? First they took ages to put up the frame for the new swing at school. It was kindly paid for by Harry Popelka to be ready for Christmas 2006 and was only set up in March 2007. Then they put the safety matting **10 metres away from the swing!** (see photo .. The reddish frame in the distance is the swing) Can you believe it...? so it was re-positioned, but now it’s all crackly and broken. And only two weeks after the swings were finally attached to the frame (also a result of heavy pushing and nagging), one

of the hooks holding a chain of the swing sheared through(!).

It looked almost like sabotage as it was separated exactly in the middle. It had to be replaced, which took another two weeks. And then the other hooks were loose. In July 2007, the bolt of the remaining swing broke while Feleng was on it. Would somebody please find a reliable, kind, honest, *fast*, handyman who will come and fix everything that’s broken at our school... for free? Swinging is great for blind children as it gives them the movement that they fear elsewhere.

VOLUNTEER SPOT

Thanks to Aamina Ballin, Abeda Peer and Kulsum Hoosan for Madressa help.

The mat and the distant swing!



Therapy



Above: Television presenter Nadine Naidoo met Melicia dos Santos, a cerebral palsy pupil



Physiotherapist Fatima Pahad shows a classroom assistant how to do exercises with a gymnastic ball



Sue Richardson does reflexology with Koketso. A good reflexologist can pick up on fears and illness of a person by massaging their feet

In February 2006, expert speech therapist Sara Rosenfeld-Johnson taught Beka staff and volunteers about effective methods of training people with speech impairments. Her novel approach of retraining the mouth muscles rather than just working with the brain centre for speech is particularly applicable to patients with injuries around their mouths.

Dorah Mokoena's lips were reconstructed with skin from her back and they have no muscle tissue, therefore she can never close her mouth and the little lip movement she has, is triggered by her jaw muscles.

Sizwe Hlophe and Feleng Mahamotse both have burns around their mouths which hinder them in pronouncing some words correctly. Their speech impairment is much less severe than Dorah's, and professional therapy promises to lead to good results.

Sara Rosenfeld-Johnson explained that speech therapy largely works by imitating. I.e., the therapist creates a sound and the patient is then asked to copy it by hearing (the sound) and seeing (the lip movement). For blind patients, the sense of touch needs to be involved, so he or she would feel the lip movement and the vibrations in the voice box, in addition to hearing the sound.

Physiotherapists Fatima Pahad and Dhriti Valab from Bell & Rogers have been assisting the school with regular on-site visits since 2004. Louise Aarts from Netcare Rehabilitation Hospital worked with Dorah Mokoena in her free time for several months.

Beka also has long term links with Hope School physiotherapists, speech therapists and occupational therapists.



Dorah Mokoena's Hungarian-designed exercise board helps to stimulate the brain by making the cerebrospinal fluid move in different planes

Training Tokoza boy's eyes to see effectively



Unam Mamane (8) arrived at Beka nearly blind, now his eyesight is steadily improving thanks to ophthalmologist Chris van Niekerk and the University of Johannesburg optometry department, particularly Marieke Richter. Unam

received glasses which correct the astigmatism in his eyes.

Astigmatism is a physical deformation of the eyeball.

Unam finds his way around well and can play almost like children with normal eyesight.

However he needs to "fine tune" his eyes, which were not used to focussing on small objects or movement. Exercises include catching a ball that is rolling towards him by placing a cup on top of it, and threading beads on string. Unam is also being taught how to write legible letters and how to dress himself, since he had been taught few life-skills before.

Unam loves singing and vigorously joins in the morning music with a voice louder than anyone else's. Getting him and his family to continue with eye exercises at home is another battle though!

Astigmatism is a condition in which the cornea is misshaped—instead of being curved like a sphere, its shape is more oval-like, which impairs its ability to focus light. This leads to blurred vision and/or a distorted image. The person will also have difficulty seeing fine detail. Depending on severity, astigmatism-related vision problems can be corrected by wearing glasses that exactly invert the "wrong" curvature of the eye's lens.

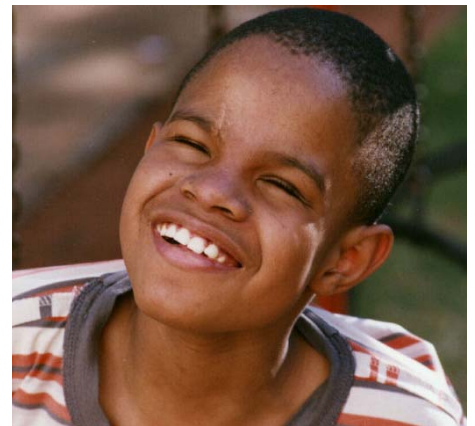
Sunny natured singer has no transport to school

Keba Maqaka is blind and has some developmental delay. He has potential but needs lots of attention to develop his talents. He used to board at Sibonile school but after he was severely assaulted by a sighted pupil his parents removed him. His family struggles with transport from Sebokeng to Johannesburg despite the fact that both parents teach and own a car.

Keba is a passionate singer and a talented musician. He has created his own inimitable tunes and

songs on the piano. He is confident in finding his way around familiar places and knows how to express his needs in Sesotho. Volunteers have reported surprisingly "conscious" actions of Keba, like greeting them with their name after only a single meeting.

We believe that with the right input at this age, Keba will be able to manage his life almost independently when he is grown up. He has a long way ahead and it is vital that steps are taken now.



Raised desks improve posture

A common problem with low vision children is bad posture as a result of having to bend over a work surface to bring the eyes closer to the paper. Geerlande Homburg, a low vision specialist from the Bartimeus School in the Netherlands, raised money through a concert and bought high-angle adjustable desks for Beka's low vision pupils. Luyanda, Talha and Unam have benefited greatly from the desks and future pupils can be certain that they won't end up with a hunchback from poor ergonomics.

Wish list: Some special angled lights to help these pupils too.



Blind president

There are cabinet ministers and mayors who are blind... And one president. Cathy Donaldson is president of Blind SA, a non profit organisation from the blind for the blind. She has been in this position since 2004. She was born blind and works in Mayfair, just 5km from our school. SA Blind supplies schools with Braille text books, helps blind people find employment and assist with social matters such as acquiring government grants. It has also run stunning blind bowls events. If you wish to help Blind SA or to be helped by them, telephone 011 839 1793.

Stimulating all the senses



Caitlyn Le Grange feels the Braille Wall



Pupils hold up tactile flags of South Africa, made from pulses (lentils, peas)



Unam Mamane explores the tactile globe



Keba Makaqa is delighted by the talking watch, donated by Geerlande Homburg, a low vision specialist from the Netherlands



Pupils and volunteers stand among their self-grown herbs: basil, mint and thyme enhance the sense of smell and taste in blind and sighted children



Nhlanhla Mpisi practices typing on one of the school's treasured Perkins Braille machines

Fundraising with flavour before Easter each year

Everyone likes chocolate. Well, almost everyone. And it is only natural, since it's proven to make people happy. Beka uses the popularity of chocolate for fundraising and marketing, and once a year holds the Johannesburg Autumn-Easter Chocolate Fest.

Geldhof, Milka, Cadbury and others donate some of their chocolate products and we sell them at our chocolate fair. This year's

Fest was remarkably lilac coloured as Milka donated a



*Long-term volunteer Richard Walls helped staff the stalls at the **Chocolate Fest 2007***

load of Naps, Montelino and Knusper-kugeln. De la Crème Patisserie in Melville sponsored some of their delicious chocolate croissants and Café Kranzler, a Swiss bakery, gave big two chocolate mousse cakes. Ian and Kate McLean, two occasional but long-term helpers, moulded chocolate teddy bears.

Again we were lucky with the weather and the very prominent yellow gazebos lent by Builders Warehouse proved use-

ful by protecting our chocolate from the sun.

Volunteers in 2005, 2006 and 2007 came to help out, staffing stands, cutting fruit to dip in the chocolate fountain or selling raffle tickets.

Mugg & Bean's mega chocolate muffins were very popular and in 2006 people flocked to find Lindt truffles and Sally Williams nougat.

Next year's Chocolate Fest will be on 15 March 2008.

Come to find out how chocolate can make you happy!

Beka helpers go gourmet

Our Chocolate Fest raffle offered such attractive prizes that Beka helpers' mouths watered. Our staff cannot win any of the prizes, but Lindiwe Ngwenya and Felix Neumann were lucky: Gillian Nicholetts of WM Translogistics, winner of a meal for two at Melville's Soula restaurant, gave her prize back to the charity and Felix and Lindi were found to deserve a meal out most. While they still talked of chorizo risotto and seared beef fillet many days later, Caroline Horn



from Illovo probably planned her getaway to the Champagne Castle Hotel in the Drakensberg. George Romarin, manager of the hotel, agreed to sponsor a raffle prize im-

mediately. Appliance City was the kind donor of the LG Chocolate cell phone. (LG itself proved less than helpful). Jacob Mati won the phone.

A hamper of Japanese chocolate, "imported" by volunteer Tomoko Harada in February 2007, was a gift for those who like it exotic.

And the Westcliff hotel donated a breakfast for two as a prize: a meal with a great view across Jo'burg!

Do it yourself...

Otherwise it's not going to happen! Many negative experiences with builders led British volunteer Chris Wilson and short-term South Africa volunteer Luke Oxlee to renovate the school's wooden floor by themselves. Mica in Campus Square helped with providing varnish at a discount price. Teachers Thatelo Nyathi and Abednigo Dube took over most of the work and after long hours of sanding, varnishing and polishing, the wooden planks were shining like new. The children did not want to understand the idea of "Do not walk on this" but the end result was quite presentable anyway. Now if our builder would complete his jobs as fast as this, we would have less to worry about.

Young children show compassion

One of the signs that a child is growing up in a loving environment is that he or she shows kindness and love to others. Zanele Jeza, a three-year-old burns survivor from Soweto, returned to Beka for renewal of her pressure garments: The moment she entered the classroom, the trouble-threesome of Sizwe (6), Feleng (5) and Vincent (5) called out her name and Sizwe leapt up and gave her a warm hug. He then took her hand and led her to her little desk, and showed her how to sort the wooden blocks that had been laid out for her. All this happened without prompting from volunteers or the teachers.

When Seiso Ratswana, a two-year-old boy who suffered inten-

tionally inflicted hot water burns, first came to Beka he was a shy and tearful little person. The children just naturally integrated him and he became their valued playmate within a few hours. Again, this happened from their own initiative. Children who are brought up with love, will in turn treat their own (or other) children well.



Feleng cuddles Seiso, a no-more-shy newcomer



Heritage Week September 2003: UMashesha and pupils dress up in traditional clothing to celebrate their culture



Holiday Week March 2005: Drums & Rhythm teach the children a Ghanaian beat



Holiday Week March 2005: Prim Reddy cooks Indian food

*Learning
is
fun*



Heritage Week September 2003: UMashesha volunteers perform Shangaan dances



Heritage Week September 2006: Zoo to You (an initiative of the Johannesburg Zoo) brings stuffed and real animals to Beka



November 2006: British actress Jane Seymour helps Beka pupils decorate a cardboard Christmas tree



Holiday Week March 2004: Hindu hand painting celebrates South Africa's Indian heritage

Tactile learning and many helpers

Tactile and sensory learning have been cornerstones of this small school with its eclectic population. Pupil numbers have ranged from two to 30, but the intention has always been to be small and effective. One-to-one tuition is the norm; it is a large class if it has six pupils. Trustee **Lorraine Doyle** brought in grasses, skins and stuffed animals through African Nature Training to make the pupils aware of the world around them. Trustee **Prakash Naidoo** helped to build the brick platform for the 15 tonne water tank, giving UMash-asha volunteers brick-laying skills along the way. Trustee **Peter Harris** helped with building materials. Trustee **Lisa Hutchinson** and long-term school friend **Debbie Tarrant** got youth in from St Mungo's church to paint classrooms when we first got the building. Lisa also ran a Moonlit Market and sold Spring flower bulbs to



Greg Schneemann, Member of Parliament, one of the train of famous visitors interested in the charity. Helen Suzman, first female Member of Parliament, also visited our school.

fund raise for the school. **Debbie Agyare-Dwomoh** and hubbie helped prepare drawings for our long hoped-for reinforced concrete paving to enable safer parking at school. **Richard Walls** made the tactile Advent calendar to teach the religious and cultural aspects leading up to Christmas. This 1.5 metre long structure had 24 windows in which items were placed that helped children understand the social aspects (spiced cakes and biscuits from around the world) as well as the much harder philosophical aspects of the birth of a boy considered by millions to be holy.

multi faith school in a multi faith society

The school encourages tolerance and knowledge of all religions and consciously does not place one above the other. This has caused some dissent in the past, not least with teachers and assistants being fearful of what they did not understand. But by looking at the aspects that they have in common a lot of consensus can be found. So the Old Testament of the Bible is largely accepted by Moslems and Jews as a holy scripture with stories and history that children should know. Atheists and agnostics also cannot doubt that knowledge of these stories is part linked to history and literature across the developed world. Because we had

Moslem pupils we had Madressa classes that all children could attend. The prejudice of Christian staff was palpable – even against the dress code of wearing a headscarf—as if they had forgotten the older Christian practice of covering one's head in church. The older pupils were made aware that Jesus was Jewish and that Moslems regard him as a prophet, so there was no reason to fear or to look down upon another religion.

Cookery classes at school were largely vegetarian or used Halal ingredients because they are easy to source and it was respectful to families of different denominations. Added to all this background, when appropriate teachers were around, the children joined in a Hindu celebration around the Goddess Lakshmi and even learned a little about Buddhism. Ultimately they will all follow the faith of their families or they will find their own unique philosophies. But knowledge is power and South Africa has a vast range of beliefs and cultures that they need to understand at least a little in order to be part of this diverse society. The only philosophy that is consistent in the school is one of pacifism. We do not allow guns or replicas to be used in play and we explain why. We live in a violent society where none remain untouched by crime. Beka does not condone the injuring or killing of others, not even in play.

Big donations and as-yet unmet promises

Graham Helps of Calbrook International helped the school early on with a donation of R50000 which helped make the building more secure. His daughter had vision problems but she has gone on to her final year as an AFDA (film and drama) student in 2007. Well done.

Old Mutual helped with costs of safer fencing at the school.

National Brands agreed to assist with teaching costs but that commitment has not yet been met.

Presenter Nadine Naidoo promised a flight to Durban for all the pupils, announcing it on SABC television 3 years ago but it did not happen... they would *still* like to go.

Tony Kamionsky, a burns survivor, kindly contributed towards the cost of teachers in the early days.

What we still need:

A lawyer to take the builder to court to retrieve our money as well as the cost of re-tiling the floor, some items of kitchen furniture

that he removed and the director's own good ladder! Money to put a window and ceiling into the garage-come-library; More money to make the accommodation area two-storey so that a caretaker can live on site more easily; More herbs and vegetables for our sensory garden. This was decimated by philistines in 2006 who had no comprehension that every child can learn something and where better than in a beautiful setting where they can feel the power of Nature.

Small charity beset by theft of consumables

Margaret and Allan Hirsch not only donated the school building to the trust but linked us to Durban-based Compendium Insurance which provided in excess of R1 million worth of public liability insurance in the event of a child being seriously injured on site. Fortunately children have suffered no more than cuts and grazes from playground falls. Protecting the school against theft was harder to do, because low-paid assistants repeatedly took consumables (food and cleaning materials) from the school as well as larger items belonging specifically to our founding child Dorah (a large radio, a cassette player) and items loaned to the school by her brother Tristan

or his family, like bed linen and towels. While large organisations can maybe shrug their shoulders and absorb such theft, the lack of morality of employees has been a persistent problem. So insurance covered the school against forced entry but not from theft by people who had free access to the building. In addition to this there was confusion in the public mind as to the link with Children of Fire and they would sometimes take donations intended specifically for the burns charity, to the school in error. Donors need to know that all items for both charities have to be taken to the shared office in Auckland Avenue, and where destined specifically for the school, they will

then be delivered there. Most of the furniture in the school was sourced by Louis Rutstein with others lent long term by Bronwen Jones. One of our earliest volunteer teachers Astrid Meyer gave a much-appreciated revolving storage shelf, a few small desks came from the German School of Johannesburg and one desk from Auckland Park Preparatory School. The gas stove was bought by the Hirsch family. Our kitchen renovations were paid in significant part by Barclays bank employees but the builder Steve Jacobs stole the substantial deposit that was paid to make the fitted units and so the planned teaching-kitchen improvements remain on hold.

Sand and water room with oversize Braille

Christian Andrews, formerly a teacher at Bishop Bavin School, was the mastermind behind our lovely Braille wall. The oversize Braille letters were manufactured from old squash balls cut in half, filled with papier maché and coated in glossy black paint.

The paintings above the Braille were produced by renowned artist Johannes Mahlangu. And the net above the seascape is hung with sensory toys so that the slowest

learner can understand cause and effect—they pull one toy on the curly cables to which they are clipped and another toy moves. As many of the items also make a noise, a slow learner with or without vision, realises that they have achieved this movement.

This is just one form of pre-primary mathematics. Similar techniques are encouraged with the weight and length and volume equipment imported from the

Royal National Institute for the Blind in the UK. We have been lucky to have advice from Robert Orr, formerly the multiple disability specialist with the RNIB, and Anita Madacs, a Hungarian expert on brain stimulation through exercises with disabled children.

When we have funds we will make a door from this special room, to lead straight into the garden and make sand and water tactile learning easier to manage.

Free stories

Blind children in South Africa can get a wide range of story tapes and even be assisted with a tape recorder on loan if they don't have one. This service is available free of charge so long as they have a functioning postal address. The tapes are put into special plastic boxes with the name of the child on a laminated label and posted to them. Once they have listened to the story a couple of times, they put it back into the box, flip the label over and send it back to Tape Aids for the Blind. The Post Office does not charge for this service. If the tape is faulty the child or parent marks it with a sticker so it does not get sent out faulty to another child. There are stories for all age children and in different languages.

Public attitudes to disfigurement

Pupils who cannot see, don't mind the appearance of other pupils. But their parents do!

Ugly does not mean stupid.

But people think that it does.

They want their children to be educated alongside "normal" children, thinking somehow that the children will get a lower quality education if they study with children who look different.

Because our building is a little scruffy, some parents also make judgments about the quality of education based on a few paint chips off the door frames.

What the caring parent *needs* to ask, at our school or at any school,

is **how many** children are there in the class? What teaching **qualifications** do your staff have? How many teaching hours do you have each term? And if their child has some vision loss, some hearing loss, or some other impediment to learning, do you have individualised learning programmes? **We do.** Each of our pupils has their own learning plan devised for their unique needs. They are not automatically moved up from one grade to another, if they cannot manage the requirements of the lower grade. If they excel at mathematics but are weak at English, then they are in a bridging grade which allows them to move ahead in the stronger subject. Our priority is **education first** regardless of

Painted pillowcases and soap-filled fish

In the September 2007 Heritage Week the children who participate will paint their own designs with fabric paints onto cotton pillowcases. Art with a purpose allows the children to take their creations home and put them to good use. Parents sometimes need to learn the reason to praise these artworks as expressions of their children's individuality and dexterity. Previous Holiday Activity weeks have seen the children making foam fish stitched together with soap inside—a useful bath toy

(thanks to the Investec Crade Group for helping with resources). And they have painted plates and small statues.

All the children enjoy beading and different companies or individuals can sponsor materials needed for these one-off art activities but a lot of recycled material can be used for art as well. We always need coloured card, project glue and our teachers seem to “eat” scissors!

We'd like to expand the computer learning programme but a dona-

tion of second hand computers by Deloitte and Touche in early 2006 has still not been matched by any legal software to make them usable. If they cannot keep to their commitment, maybe another company could help?

And recorders, tambourines, drums and triangles for music lessons would be great too! Along with a very sturdy child-resistant CD and tape player and a video player that they cannot break or a service contract for all the repairs!

From a grain of wheat to a loaf of bread—a chain of life

Cookery is one of the best lessons of the week. We have had inspired and less inspired cookery teachers but all were on a voluntary basis and generally funded their own ingredients which helped with budgeting.

The best teachers prepared their lessons long in advance and liaised with the regular teachers to maximise the learning potential. E.g. talk about bread. Take a grain of wheat and let the children feel it. Put the grain in the soil and let the blind child feel the soil, the water, and as the days or weeks go on, feel the shoot that comes from the seed and the ear of wheat that grows. Let the child take the dry grains of wheat and grind them

into flour. Let the child walk through the shops and feel all those packets of flour. And then dust the yeast off a fruit. And on and on. It is a chain of life that they need to absorb, because without pictures they need to **feel** and **taste** their learning. From the flour and yeast and other ingredients, they can mix the dough and let it rise. Even our most disabled pupils can feel involved if without fingers or useful sight, they get to pummel the dough. Finally, eating the completed product that they themselves have made, allows the least able child to feel successful.

Trustee Julia Hill prepared many brilliant cookery lesson plans but as the years went on, her business

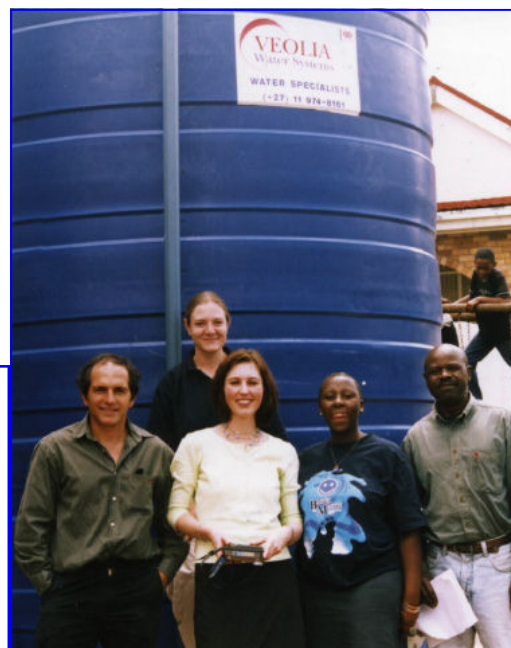
Designer Faire took more and more of her time. Marita Irvine took over and Marion Custers helped and then Louise Barnes and her friend Dominique. We still need more hands-on teaching in cookery and art and older lesson plans can be re-used for pupils who have joined in later years.

Art flourished under the help from Kate Wentworth. But as her company took over another company, she too had less time to come. But the skills of volunteers who supplement our core teaching staff are the spice of school life. They bring in fresh ideas and energy and will remain part of the curriculum for years to come. If you have a skill to share, phone 011 726 6529.



Beka has a paraplegic-friendly bathroom sponsored by Rotary and the Round Table, and all rooms and the playground are wheelchair-accessible.

Veolia Water donated a 15,000 litre water tank to the school. We teach our children to be environmentally friendly and to save water.





Arts and crafts are part of every Holiday Activity Week with origami (paper folding) beading, weaving and more



Jubilation after a dance and drama workshop at the Heritage Week in September 2004

Do re mi fa so la ti do—Sontonga, Drums, JPO

We hear, touch, taste, smell, see. Some of our children see nothing at all or have blurred vision, or a world of shadows. Some of our children have other dimmed senses too. None of them has more acute hearing than other children but maybe they learn to use that sense more effectively to compensate for missing out on the visual world. Music is an essential part of learning. Classical music from the time when a foetus is 12 weeks old, can be heard and stimulate a

child's development. The older the children are when they come to us, the less accustomed they are to enjoying classical music. But allow them to sit by the piano alone and they start to play simple classical tunes even without tuition. Most mornings the children start the day with piano or guitar playing; sometimes we have volunteers who can play the clarinet, saxophone or recorder. And along the way the weekly boarders have attended evening concerts performed by the

Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra and had the privilege of the Sontonga Quartet playing for them on site several times. Drums and Rhythmn run drumming workshops once or twice a year at the school and girls from a Moslem school came to teach their traditional songs to the children on one of our popular Holiday Activity Weeks. Composer Philip Miller ran a story-to-music workshop for the pupils too. Even more musical input would be welcome.



When a fire engine from Rosebank Fire Brigade was called out to Auckland Park on false alarm, they agreed to stop by at our school so that the children could see, feel and hear a fire engine close up.

Pearls and Pimples

Pearls to:	Pimples to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Dis-Chem Foundation for keeping our teachers afloat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Steve the Brakpan-area builder who stole our kitchen refurbishment money
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Talisman Tool Hire for lending us a floor sander 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Eddie the builder who was paid to put toothbrush holders in all three school bathrooms in October 2006. And they are still not done!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Michelle, Lerato, Nyawira, Lebo for volunteering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ People who dump their rubbish next to our glass recycling bin
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ian McLean for making a wheelchair ramp, getting gates welded, repairing a ceiling early on and helping with library shelving. 	

Dictionary

Glaucoma—Chronic glaucoma is a condition in which the pressure in the eye constantly increases because fluid in the eye (aqueous humour) cannot drain properly. While the pressure increases, the vision decreases almost unnoticeably at first. As opposed to acute glaucoma, it is not painful. Eye drops are used to improve the outflow of aqueous humour, and tablets reduce the production of fluid. If that treatment does not work, a new channel to drain fluid can be created surgically. Luyanda and Katrinky have glaucoma. Katrinky's was caught too late.

Nystagmus refers to rapid involuntary eye movement. It can be congenital and exacerbated by marrying too close relatives. Other



Talha, a pupil with nystagmus

reasons include a disorder in the part of the brain that controls the eye movement, or disorders in the organ of balance in the ear.

Oliver Twist

Pupils of Beka enjoy its unique concept of learning by fun and educational experiences. Among these are visits to the National Children's Theatre at least four times a year. In July 2005 and July 2007 the children were invited to watch "A Pocket Oliver Twist", and not only Beka-pupils but also children from Joe Slovo squatter camp had the pleasure of going on the excursions.

Thanks to the **National Children's Theatre** (formerly the Johannesburg Youth Theatre) for allowing our children to watch your plays!

Aids-related blindness increases as people survive longer

The acquired immune deficiency syndrome (Aids) was first identified in 1981. Aids-related vision problems were only described in medical literature four years later. Vision loss is one of the later stage complications of Aids; in the first years after Aids was identified, people died before vision problems set in. As treatment improved, Aids patients survived to the stage of vision loss.

The most common form of visual impairment in Aids patients is cytomegalovirus (CMV) retinitis. There are medicines to stabilise the

condition, but they have toxic side effects, limiting their use. It is most likely to result in blindness.

The CMV attacks the retina and many other organs in the body at the same time. Half of the people with CMV-related vision problems also suffer from chronic or severe diarrhoea.

Some opportunistic infections that can infect vision are Kaposi's sarcoma (it can cause purple-red growths on the eyelid or the conjunctiva that block the sight), toxoplasmosis (damages retina) and cryptococcal meningitis

(caused by fungus that can damage the optic nerve among other brain centres). **More schools for the blind will be needed.**

Source: "AIDS and Vision Loss" by Edwin Kiester, Jr, published in 1990 by the American Foundation for the Blind. ISBN: 0-89128-167-3

Noticeboard

Thanks to R and R signs in Fordsburg for constructing our permanent notice board and for help with many smaller signs.

The Johannesburg School for Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children Trust (Beka)

Phone: 011 726 6529
 Fax: 011 482 4258
 E-mail: firechildren@icon.co.za

We see your child's potential.



Donations can be made to:
JHB School Blind, Low Vision
First National Bank, Melville
Branch code: 25 65 05
Acc.-no.: 620 502 081 59



In the warm summer months our children enjoy the pool every day at the office site. Sizwe (6, far left) can swim a full width of the pool and Feleng (5, centre in water) has learned how to keep himself above the surface. Katrinky (not in picture) is still suspicious of water but had swimming lessons from volunteer Felix Neumann. Katrinky learned how to use her feet as paddles and learned how to move around in the shallow end of the pool without assistance. A big thank you to Slam Pool Care for keeping the pool sparkling blue. Come on summer!

In brief: South Africa, Japan, Switzerland.

Boitumelo Tsotetsi (15) and fellow pupils at Greenside High School collected 1400 bread clips in aid of our biannual Holiday Week art activities. Bread clips have so many different uses. They can



hold together bread bags, decorate hair and beard (see *Daily Sun* photographer above!), and most importantly they make scales on our tactile cardboard fish. Teach your children how to recycle, and how important it is to protect their environment.

Thanks Greenside, great effort!

Tomoko Harada (23) followed the call of former volunteer Koichi Morita. She stayed at the school for six weeks, withstood all the Jackie Chan jokes and was a great help, especially teaching bread baking to classroom assistants. It was a culture shock but we wish you all the best for the future. Arigato and sayonara!



Japanese volunteer Tomoko Harada exercising with Nhlanhla Mpsi (6) on the gymnastic ball.

On 21 February 2007 Beka pupils went on an outing to Café Kranzler bakery in Richmond. They got to make their own pastries and got a tour through the bakery by the owner. Danke!



Peter Egenrieder of Geneva Swiss Confectionery shows Sizwe Hlophe-Jones (6) how to make a delicious "Apfeltasche" (apple bag)