

Rock of Joy, Uganda – A Special Friendship

In February, I was fortunate enough to have been part of the Adult Team that went out to Uganda. As a school, St. Peter's has had a special link with the Rock of Joy School in Massaka since 2007, as part of the Rock of Joy Trust. We have worked closely with the Trust in supporting numerous projects that have seen improvements to the facilities and



resources at the school. Both trustees and members of the Youth Fellowship missions, many of them ex-pupils, have led Collective Worship and updated our pupils on the progress and improvements that have been made over the last seven years. In 2010 and 2012, we were able to send out two members

of teaching staff as part of the respective adult trips and have also benefited from visits by both Fred Ssendi and Stephen Sonko on their visits to Heswall.

I have really appreciated St. Peter's School being part of the journey and seeing the growth of the Rock of Joy School over this time, and developing the special relationship and friendship that now exists between our two schools. So I felt hugely privileged to have the opportunity to experience Uganda for myself and the chance to see at first-hand the amazing progress that Fred Ssendi has been made in building the school communities at Rock of Joy and Lady Grace.

Having been involved with the Rock of Joy School and the Trust for the last seven years, I thought I had a fair idea of what to expect and what it would be like when I got there, but nothing quite prepared me for the sights and distinct smells of Uganda. They really need to be experienced to be fully appreciated! The phrase 'a different world' is not an exaggeration and yet no less beautiful and endearing.

On our second day, we arrived at the school for the Sunday church service and the reception we received was quite overwhelming. The minibus pulled into the school grounds and was immediately engulfed all around by children waving and smiling at us, and as we disembarked we were 'jumped upon' with wonderful hugs of joy, what a welcome! This set the tone for the whole trip and the love and appreciation we received from everyone was most humbling.



Prior to travelling out, we collected children's second-hand shoes, with a number of local schools joining in with the appeal. The team ended up with the desperately frustrating situation of having more shoes than we were able to take out with us, largely due to the other resources we needed to take out and the restrictions on our baggage allowance. This proved particularly heart wrenching on our first morning in the school, when we laid out the shoes and were hit with the realisation that the need was far greater than we were going to be able to meet.

Children from 3 to 12 were identified by the Headteacher and sent to the hall where we were waiting to allocate each pair of shoes to the children before us. There was a feeling of the 'Cinderella' story about it, with some children desperately trying to convince us that the



shoes fitted them even when they were clearly too small or too big for them. There were at least 20 children that came to us in bare feet, their feet dirty, dusty and with sores from the harshness of the Ugandan terrain. The delight on their faces in receiving a pair of shoes of their own was a very special moment. The allocation took no time at all and before we knew it all the shoes had been given out, with many more children waiting and left disappointed. This was a very difficult moment. We desperately wanted to help them and quickly made the decision to take the details of

the remaining children that had been sent to us and were able to source some second-hand shoes in the local market a few days later.

The following morning, a young boy called Paul came up to me. Paul had been one of the fortunate pupils who received shoes from us the day before and he presented me with a small package that had been carefully wrapped in banana leaves. Carefully opened the leaves, I discovered four eggs and a hand written note. The gift was from Paul's mother and the note explained that she was so grateful that her son had been given a pair of shoes. She expressed her sadness and disappointment that she couldn't afford to provide him with shoes herself. She was so grateful to the team for providing Paul with such a gift and wanted to express her appreciation with a gift of her own. A very touching moment.

During the two weeks, there were so many more stories and experiences that had a profound and personal impact on me and I know this was felt by each member of the group. I thoroughly enjoyed being back in the classroom 'at the chalk face' and teaching English and Maths across the different age groups. However, I also really valued the time spent at break and lunchtimes sitting and talking with the children, in small groups and on an individual level, and getting to learn a little more about their personal stories and their aspirations.

The one thing that struck me more than anything was how simple and 'uncluttered' the children's lives are in these communities. They have very little in the way of personal possessions and yet those that they have are special to them and treasured so much. Many have had a tough upbringing, with a significant number having lost one



or both parents to AIDS, and yet one overriding element shone out throughout my time with them. The children's immense joy for life, their enthusiasm to learn, along with a wonderful happiness, and always wearing a huge smile on their faces, was evident each and every day. My two weeks with them led me to conclude that for these children there are two key factors in their lives. The first is education and a desire to work hard and do well at school, and the other is a strong faith and a real appreciation of the love God shows them each day.

As a team we went out with our best intentions, to use our skills, expertise and enthusiasm to provide resources, support, love and encouragement to the children and staff at each of the schools and, in some small part, to make a difference and leave a lasting impression on each of the school communities we worked with. I believe we achieved this. However, what we each received in return was significantly greater and will leave a long and lasting impression on us all.

Chris Penn
Headteacher