Sponsor Stories: “A memorable few days spent with the SOS Africa staff and children”

Thursday 11 April, 2024

Charity Sponsor Ian Swindale shares his experiences of a memorable few days spent with the SOS Africa Charity Staff and Children in the Western Cape, South Africa…

The plane lands at Cape Town airport in the early morning after an overnight flight from London and Sive, who drives for SOS Africa, is waiting to take me to my hotel in the hills above Gordon's Bay. This is my first visit to sub-Saharan Africa and I'm looking forward to seeing first-hand the work being done by SOS Africa.

I spend the morning settling in and Matt comes to pick me up at 2pm. We've never met before so it's great to finally meet up and get to know each other. He takes me to the newly completed Gordon's Bay centre, which is also where Matt lives with his lovely wife Claudia and boisterous five-year-old son Ted. The new centre is very impressive, with rooms for various activities, a kitchen where cookery lessons can take place, a large balcony for judo, a swimming pool and a garage, complete with lathe and band saw, which will be a manual skills training centre. A group of young teenagers are taking part in a trivia quiz and I am invited to join one of the teams. I hold my own until the questions turn to popular youth culture!

Day two and it's an early start as I am due to meet six of the eight care worker trainees who I am supporting financially throughout their course. They are doing their practical training now and have to head off to work but we have time to sit and they tell me about their lives, their hopes for the future and their experiences with the elderly living in the care homes where they are training. It is very satisfying to know that once they pass the course, they will all have guaranteed jobs to go to. Staff members Lorraine, Charmaine and Colleen are clearly completely dedicated to making sure that all the women who pass through their doors complete their training successfully and become independent wage earners.

We then head off to Somerset West Methodist Primary School, where Eden is giving some first graders help in learning to read. They start with a minute or two of physical exercise and then Eden has the children concentrating on the letters C and K, how they are pronounced, how they are written and the children pick objects off the shelf which begin with a C and then a K. Eden is a totally dedicated teacher who has been running the reading programme for some years and has developed her own version of the programme they are using to make it more culturally suitable. It is an absolute pleasure to meet her.

At lunch, we are joined by Marja, an educational psychologist employed part time by SOS Africa as a consultant. She has the challenging role of helping children with behavioural or other problems through therapy sessions. Then we head off to St Michael's Primary School in the apple growing area called Elgin Orchards. The SOS Africa Education Centre is a wooden structure designed by SOS Africa’s Claudia. The use of wood creates a warmer, softer atmosphere for the children to work in after spending the morning in school. I meet staff members Davedeen and Michsaan. The children introduce themselves to me and I am shown around. As elsewhere I am impressed by the quiet dedication of the staff to the children in their care.

The following day, with just one education centre left to visit, Matt takes me first to the Mondeor School of Skills a partnering school of SOS Africa. Principal Charne is clearly totally devoted to the children who pass through her school, where she has been principal for fifteen years. As its name suggests, the school aims to train children who are less academically inclined to learn a skill or skills that will provide them with the opportunity to find full-time employment once they graduate.

Our final visit is to SOS Africa’s Grabouw Education Centre. Again, this is a timber framed building designed by Claudia and is placed right at the heart of the school. The team is led by Sharnice and her two assistants, Sinazo and Ilenthea. We arrive as Sharnice and Sinazo are dancing with the kindergarten children who are a pleasure to watch. I am particularly keen to talk to Sinazo and Ilenthea as I am sponsoring their wages for a couple of years while Matt works on bringing their salaries into the general SOS Africa budget. I find them both delightful young women who are very happy to be working for SOS Africa and very dedicated to the children they work with.

Saturday morning and it is time to leave the Gordon's Bay area and head for Cape Town for a holiday! But there is one last treat in store. I am to meet a first year High School student, who I am sponsoring, together with her parents (sponsor a child in South Africa). Both Matt and I are hugely impressed by the family and the effort they have all put into her academic success. She has just started at an excellent

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High School and we all have high hopes for her.

As I say goodbye to Matt at the Gordon's Bay centre and Sive drives me to my hotel in Cape Town, I think back about everything I have seen during the last few days. I am struck especially by two things; firstly, how happy the children seem to be when they are in the educational centres. I do not doubt they would like to spend more time there. Secondly, I am very impressed by all the staff I have met. They are so friendly and the enormous dedication they show every day to the children is crucial to the success of SOS Africa.

And of course, Matt is still working away, as he has done for the last 21 years to increase the amount of support SOS Africa can offer to these impressive children from poor backgrounds who would not have the chances they are going to have without the support of SOS Africa.

At the end of my visit Matt says, “I think you'll be back”. I think he may well be right.

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