

Project Report

Carl Sithole Children's Centre, Soweto

The well being of children is at the heart of the vision of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, and has been a key programme area since the organisation's inception in 1994.

The Salvation Army run Carl Sithole Centre in Soweto, Gauteng province, is an excellent example of the breadth of the programme, offering as it does a wide range of help and support to children who are vulnerable for many different reasons. The centre also demonstrates NMCF's strong belief in the importance of community development – it is well integrated locally, and offers volunteering and income generation opportunities for adults in addition to the protection and development of children.

Founded in 1998 the centre now has five different and complementary elements to it. The first is *Bethany Home* – a residential home for children from 6-18 who are orphaned, or have been abandoned, or are unable to live at home because of parental abuse.

The aim of the Home, however, is not to keep the children there forever. There is a team of counsellors and social workers who, where appropriate, work with families and children to rebuild relationships with the ultimate aim of reuniting children with their families. This can take anything from two to five years, but the strong belief that the family environment is the best for children where possible, informs and motivates this difficult, but fulfilling work. The social workers also run a programme of fostering and adoption for those who do not have a family, or for whom reunification is not possible. The work of the social work team over the past years has resulted in a much more positive response to fostering and adoption within local communities with the result that more children have the chance for a stable and happy future in a family.

The Bethany School is the second element within the centre, which caters for children from the Bethany Home and from the local community, offering, where needed, special educational help. Once they reach the age of 16 the children can move from Bethany School to the local secondary school to complete their education. We heard the uplifting story of Nomazizi, who had come the home as a small child, and having completed her education was now studying to be a social worker herself.

Fortunately, our visit coincided with playtime at *the Crèche and Pre-school* which accepts children from 6 months to 6 years, - those from 2-6 years being part of the increasingly important early years education programme. We were overwhelmed by the confident, friendly and adventurous children who ran to welcome us – keen to demonstrate their prowess on the climbing frame. The crèche accepts children who are known to be HIV positive and has done a great deal to educate the community of parents, and develop understanding and tolerance of the condition. Following workshops with the parents to explain the policy and the lack of risk to uninfected children, no child was withdrawn, and the crèche operates positively and harmoniously.

The bright colourful and welcoming building that is *Bethesda House* is a pleasure to walk into. It is home to 36 children, the majority of whom are HIV positive, having been abandoned by

mothers who realised their own status and the risk to their child. Yet this is not a place of gloom or sadness – the children, many of whom are receiving anti retroviral medication, are happy, energetic and full of life. The circular building is divided into boys' and girls' bedrooms for the children, and all are simply but brightly decorated and furnished.

We also met adults who volunteer at the centre, who have become involved as a result of the *community outreach* programme. The origins of the programme lay in a desire to support carers of those with HIV/Aids, with information about medicines and nutrition. The living with HIV/Aids support group that emerged from this early initiative now engages in income generating activities such as beading and sewing. They also started a bakery to ensure that those in real need received bread supplies, but as it became more established the bakery now sells to other institutions in the area, such as schools and hospitals. Indeed, such is the demand that they are looking to upgrade the equipment to increase both range and productivity. This is a real success story and one that offers long-term opportunities within the community.

For the past four years Carl Sithole centre has received funding from NMCF to fund part of the social work team, play equipment for the crèche, and part of the salaries of the full time staff members that we met. Their professionalism humour and compassion were evident, as was the difference they, with the support of NMCF, were able to make to children's lives.



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