

TRIP UPDATE.....



Dear Friends

I thought I would just write a few words to update you about our most recent trip to Lily of the Valley in South Africa in November 2009.

As ever, our trip did not really start with our team's arrival at Heathrow airport, but with the meetings that took place beforehand, by way of preparing our volunteers for the task ahead. These meetings are an essential part of the trip and enable us to ensure volunteers are knowledgeable about Lily, and the activities they will be undertaking there. The meetings also help with team building and understanding.

The day we left the UK it was cold and rainy and the sky was a foreboding colour of grey. My waterproof hiking shoes were struggling as I made my way to terminal 3 to meet with the rest of the team who had gathered at the check in desk.

Our team was much smaller this year, with Samina Shah, a trustee for TWO WEEKS and a doctor, Patricia Lipska and Denise McClean who are both social workers, and I, Karen Patten, acting team leader for the trip. Previous trips to Lily of the Valley had as many as 11 volunteers and so having a smaller team was going to be a new experience.

Terminal 3 was amass with people and after a few traumas at the check in desk, we managed to bundle our cargo of new baby clothes on board the plane without a penalty for being 'slightly' overweight. The clothes had been donated by a clothing firm that had gone out of business during the recession and we were determined to bring them as the children rarely have any new clothes or shoes and so this would be a real bonus.

We were met at Durban Airport by two young ladies holding up a sign with Lily of the Valley on it. They were Josie & Kristina, German volunteers staying at Lily of the Valley for a few months who had kindly come to collect us. They had also brought a familiar member of the Lily family to take us home in, the ol' faithful 'Combi van' which has survived the test of time, despite the many miles it has had to travel, poor 'roads' and marauding hoards of excited children that spared it no mercy on the many trips it has taken the Lily children and volunteers on.

They laughed at the amount of luggage we had considering we were only there for two weeks. We quickly explained why we seemed so overloaded to ensure that we did not look like spoilt tourists and then with the Combi fully loaded, made our way to Lily.

Travelling from the airport was interesting as I noticed some changes along the roadside. We usually pass a small shanty town as we leave the airport complex; however, it had now disappeared and in its place were some neater, small, box like homes with a door and small window. It seems the 2010 World Cup is having an effect.

The journey to Lily seemed longer that day. We were tired, and lets be honest a bit smelly and hungry- plane food is only meant to sustain, not fulfil. We stopped off to get a few supplies to tide us over and by the time we emerged darkness had fallen. Again, this was a new experience for me. We usually enter the gates of Lily and hear the voices of the children laughing and playing which is an immediate draw to then go to say hello and run around with them. But this time our arrival was met with silence and the drip, drip of the rain. The clear blue skies had descended into an all too familiar 'London grey' colour and rain had begun to fall. The rain had seemed to follow us.

It was not the arrival we were used to, but I still felt a sense of gratitude and peace at returning to Lily. The next day was induction day where we orientate folks around Lily and introduce them to the children. As it was a Sunday, we went to meet the children in their Sunday school and soon found ourselves joining in with their activities. Wiggly bodies were everywhere, accompanied by in and out of tune singing and the occasional mischief that was immediately addressed with a stern look from the volunteers and other adults around them. Samina, Patricia and Denise went to sit in with the 'little-uns', whilst I sat with the older children who were putting on a play. This was so much fun as some of the volunteers from Germany and Korea also dressed up and participated. It is always a sight to see a Korean man dressed as an angel in a dress.



The children were delighted by this sight and were rolling about the floor laughing; teeth and cheeks full of smiles were everywhere.

Familiar faces and warm embraces greeted us and so did some interesting habits, as Musa – a little boy at Lily, insisted on eating his shoes despite my trying to stop him. And yes, they do feed them well at Lily.

Other friends welcomed us afterwards and it was lovely to see Warren (Manager of the Children's Village) and his wife Sung Min with associated 'bump' as she is now expecting. Smiles and laughter all round, even Junie and Duchess, the resident dogs at Lily seemed happy to see us – that was a really good day. We spent some time with the children and afterwards began to finalise plans with regards to our activities for the next two weeks.

We went to bed with the rain falling and at 1am we were woken up by the confused cries of a cockerel. Lily had decided to keep chickens; and yes, they were living right next to our house. Roast chicken anyone?!

The joke, 'so you guys decided to bring the London weather with you', followed us for the next few days. It seems that the South African spring/summer had become confused and decided to make us feel really at home, and so it rained and rained and rained. Our poor volunteers Patricia and Denise seemed bemused by this, but they did not let it deter them. As mentioned before, they are social workers who work in London and specialise in adoption and fostering. Their personal project was to work with the social worker at Lily and exchange ideas on how to prepare the children, house mothers and prospective parents when a child will be leaving Lily. Phume is the social worker at Lily and had recently joined the staff there. She was just completing her training and was very happy to work with Patricia and Denise as they exchanged skills and experiences.

To recap, the set up at Lily is that there are small houses in the main children's village.

Each house can accommodate up to 6 children and a house mother or father lives with them, providing their meals, washing and cleaning for them and ensuring that they take their medication if HIV positive or have tuberculosis. They are essentially like the Lily children's mother or father, and in turn the house mother or father sees these children as their own as some of them have cared for a number of the Lily children for many years. In fact, the house mothers leave their own children to secure a job, as you must remember there is about 90% unemployment in the township of Mophela. So the process of a child leaving Lily and their house mother is a big step and often very upsetting for all of those involved.

There were 3 children that were due to be adopted or fostered and therefore leave Lily of the Valley. Denise and Patricia set about meeting with the children and the house mothers. They also talked to the other children that lived in the house and met with their friends. They discussed how each person felt about the move and their wishes for the future and did 'life story' work with them in the form of letters, cards and a life story book with pictures and certain objects that represent memories and wishes for that child.

I sat in with one of these sessions and it really opened my eyes. I had always realised that these women leave their own children in order to provide for them, but in the process gain an additional family and become mothers again. However, I did not appreciate the extent of this additional motherhood and as I listened to one of the house mothers explain how she wishes the little girl that would be leaving house 8 would get a good education and one day get married and be happy and that she hopes she may go to her wedding to see how happy she is, I began to understand that this little girl who she had cared for for a number of years was indeed her daughter and should be thought of as such. Tears flowed that day as the house mother wrote her letter, and the tears were not hers alone. I felt a lump come in my throat also.

'The children were delighted by this sight and were rolling about the floor laughing; teeth and cheeks full of smiles were everywhere'

Samina and I had a different task. Our focus was to work in the clinic at Lily, as well as attend to the children's needs as they arose. But we also needed to plan for the future in order to fulfil our aim of rolling out more trips to Lily and other projects in 2010 and onwards. This requires a lot of planning and so we set to organising our timetable of meetings and working in the clinic and elsewhere.

We met with folks at the AHP, an organisation that facilitates the registration of clinicians with the South African health board. This is something we need to organise for future volunteers to allow us to work in the community. We also met with clinicians at local clinics and facilities such as the Don McKenzie, the TB hospital in 1000 Hills, to see how best TWOWEEKS volunteers could assist them. This hospital has over 300 patients and only 2 doctors to run it. There used to be only one doctor, but now that there are two, Dr Carpenter, a much 'unsung hero', now looked much less stressed and more rested.

The health clinic at Lily is now open and seeing patients on a daily basis. Sihle is the nurse that runs the clinic and Dr Leon Van Schalkwyk is the doctor who comes twice a week to see patients. The doctors from Greys Hospital also come to the clinic to see the Lily children with HIV/AIDS.

For me personally, I always feel a real sense of achievement when I work in the Lily clinic. I cannot help but remember how Preethi (a trustee for TWO WEEKS) and I stood on the piece of land where the clinic now stands and discussed plans for the building and services with an architect and the directors at Lily. It is so amazing to see it now finished and serving the needs of the people of Mophela. The plans for the clinic are unfolding with each day and it is hoped Dr Leon Van Schalkwyk will attend 3 times a week next year and act to review all of the children at Lily and Makaphutu. TWO WEEKS used to review all the children with a 'head to toe' assessment and we have been asked to be involved with this again in the future.



'He had lived in the dark, sustaining whatever temperature was enforced in that mud shack with a corrugated roof for two years'.

The HIV testing program also called the Voluntary Counselling & Testing (VCT) program - which TWO WEEKS was involved in setting up- is also running well. This service essentially has a counsellor who goes into the community and provides information about HIV and AIDS. They also offer an on the spot test, which requires a few drops of blood from the finger onto a testing strip, similar to a pregnancy test kit. The result is available within 5 minutes and further advice and management can be supplied by the clinic at Lily. They also do testing at the clinic and so for those who do not wish to be tested in their homes, they are encouraged to come to the clinic where support groups and counselling is also offered.

I know I am not supposed to express favouritism, but I cannot help but admit that it was our time visiting patients in the township of Mophela that really enthused and excited me about the work that TWO WEEKS volunteers will be doing in the future. Our first attempt to go into the community was hampered by a storm and even though Samina and I made our way to the clinic that day to see if we would still go, we were met with glances that seemed to ask, 'are you crazy?'. So our initial trip was postponed until the South African weather had decided to forget that we Brits had no desire to remember the conditions at home. However, the barrage of rain and grey decided to give way to warm and very appreciated sunshine and armed with our 4x4, we made our way off the beaten track and into the hills of Mophela.

Despite the poverty and poor living conditions, Mophela is a very beautiful place. There are rolling hills that are the most luscious shade of green that you have ever seen. And then these hills are dotted with bright colours of purple and pink from the blossom of the trees that grow there. There is also the occasional flash of yellow and orange from the brightly coloured houses that litter the hill sides. Sounds of children's voices and mothers calling to them, with dogs barking and the occasional car 'brumming by' echo amidst the valleys; but for the most part, it is a very quiet place.

There we visited people who were predominantly house bound and this really opened my eyes once more. The case that most shocked me, if not the whole team, was a gentleman who had had a stroke 2 years ago. He had lost the ability to speak and the use of the right side of his body. He was barely able to walk with the assistance of two people and essentially lived in a room approximately 2m x 3m, whose 4 walls were made of mud. It was dark and cold and there was a horrible musty smell. A cluster of chicks with a hen were barricaded in the corner and our team could barely squeeze into the dwelling; there were 6 of us. This poor man had lived this way for 2 years. He had lived in the dark, sustaining whatever temperature was enforced in that mud shack with a corrugated roof for two years. His family said that they had not taken him to see a doctor as they could not afford to and that it was difficult to move him. I could see their predicament, especially with the issues of transport as our team had struggled to climb the steep slope to get to his home, slipping and sliding on more than one occasion. We examined the gentleman and made plans to send transport to have him reviewed at the health clinic at Lily.

But our work was not limited to a medical review. This man and his family had no income, no papers and no understanding of getting help from the government. This is where our social workers came in as they learned that there is a great need for people to advise and assist with issues such as this. We then learned that there is a social worker who is supposed to help with cases like this.





However, this social worker, this lone social worker is responsible for covering the township of Mophela (40,000 people), Sankontshe (60,000 people) and Geordedale (50,000 people). So this poor person has the task of helping over 150,000 people, identifying need, dealing with child abuse and rape, assisting those in desperate poverty and the list goes on. Unsurprisingly, the turnover for these social workers is very high. After learning this we began to ask if this poor person wore a cape and tights as only a superhero with special powers could undertake this role. But in all seriousness, we were told that there is a real need to assist with social work in these areas and volunteers would be greatly appreciated.

‘Through her tears all I could tell her was that she was now safe, and to believe that the people and Lily will now take care of her’.



The Home Based Carer who came with us into the community explained that her role is to identify people such as this man and report back to the staff at Lily so that they can help further. The scope for future volunteers is therefore enormous as the assistance that could be provided is not only medical, but also helping with social issues, assisting the social worker with her duties. We could distribute food parcels, advise on benefits and programs that the government has employed. We could help with transporting sick patients and educate on various issues ranging from health, diet and so on. The possibilities and the need kept on presenting themselves with each person we reviewed.



Our time was not only spent in the community. We saw the usual cuts and grazes at Lily with a few infections here and there also. But one night we received a knock on the door and were told that one of the children had collapsed at the village and they needed our assistance. So Samina and I jumped into the waiting car and went to review this child. As we arrived at the house, the house mother, manager Warren and his wife with the children who lived in the house, all stood around this girl anxiously who was still and lifeless. We did an assessment and took a history and it seemed as though she had had some kind of seizure, but it was not a typical one. She slowly began to recover and deemed stable, we decided to take her to the clinic in the morning for further tests.



Over the next few days, she had further drop attacks where we took her to the emergency department and despite being discharged, ended up being admitted to hospital where something was seen on the CT scan.

We still do not know what the diagnosis is, but we were so glad to see her on our final

day at Lily, looking well and smiling. She bounded up to us and gave us a big hug. And although she looked well that day, she was still undergoing tests and awaiting the CT report. We really hope and pray that it is nothing too serious.

A frequent question asked at our pre trip meetings is, ‘will it be depressing at Lily?’, to which we usually reply ‘no’. Lily is a happy place and despite many of the children often having horrible stories which resulted in their coming to Lily, these children have been given a gift of a new beginning and hope. But on this trip there were some definite sad times and tears shed as a result.

About 5 days before we left Lily, we learned of a little girl, about 8 years old who had come to Lily at midnight the night before. She had come there requiring a ‘place of safety’ as she had been raped by her neighbour.

This poor child. She was traumatised and could hardly speak. She looked no one in the eye and found it difficult to walk. I will not go into too much detail here, but her physical condition was not good and all she did was cry. She cried all through the night and often in the day. She cried if you held or hugged her and she cried as she ate. She did not cry alone. Whatever we tried to do to console her never seemed to work; she was scared, confused and probably missed her family; it was heartbreaking.

The team tried to do what they could for this little girl. Unfortunately, we as medics could do nothing for her wounds. Due to an ‘oversight’ she had not been reviewed by the police surgeon and so we were not allowed to touch her or ‘interfere with any evidence’. It was just so horrible.

The social workers, Denise & Patricia, spent time with her and Denise played the mother figure very well. I also spent some time with her and did some colouring in and tried to get the other children at Lily to talk to her. I have to admit that the children at Lily are remarkable in this aspect. I guess many of them remember all too well what it was like to come to this strange environment with lots of new faces. They probably remember missing those people and places they had been removed from and how alone they must have felt at first. Through her tears all I could tell her was that she was now safe, and to believe that the people at Lily will now take care of her.



I let her know that she will be loved at Lily and make friends and perhaps a new family will emerge as a result. This was little comfort for her I know, but I just wanted to plant that seed of knowledge with the hope that it will take hold more quickly. I found it really hard leaving her on the last day. She had stopped crying, but she still was very unhappy. Thankfully she had been given some antibiotics and her wounds attended to and so at least her physical scars could now begin to heal.

Another sad occurrence was the death of one of the house mothers whilst we were there. Anika was a house mother that some of the TWO WEEKS team had come to know quite well. She was one of the most gentle and kind women you could ever meet. Her loving nature always benefitted the children that lived in her house and I found her easy to talk to. She leaves 3 children and also her mother Margaret who also works at Lily as a house mother. It was so distressing to see Margaret grieving, and this was true for Denise and Patricia who had come to know Margaret very well as they had worked closely with her. Once again there were tears shed in sympathy for her pain and we also visited her home in Mophela.

The children at Lily also needed to be told about Anika's death and the day they were informed I believe was the most challenging for the team. The girls and boys were put in separate rooms and Phume the social worker made the announcement to the group of girls and then left them with Denise and Patricia as she went to tell the boys. One by one the girls began to cry until it reached almost hysterical proportions. Anika was one of their surrogate mothers, a part of the Lily family and they took her death really badly. The social workers feeling a bit overwhelmed by the response called on Samina and I. However, met with the sheer numbers and scale of distress, we soon called Warren.

Warren later explained that not all of the children really knew Anika that well. However, their cries and wailing were for real and we wondered if Anika's death represented all the loss they had suffered in the past and this was a way for repressed memories and hurt to express themselves. I have to admit I was really proud of the team that day. One by one they comforted the children, took them for walks and stayed with them until they calmed down. And I think the children appreciated our concern also as they were a lot more clingy and attentive after this.

So our time at Lily gathered pace in the last few days and we found ourselves packing up our things and saying our goodbyes.

The cockerel was still alive (just), and the sun had decided to make a welcome appearance in the second week. Our time at Lily had been full of activities, experiences and emotions and we were all glad that we came. Our children at Lily are growing and with that come new challenges. Lily stage III is near to completion and TWO WEEKS has been asked to help with this phase with a view to preparing the older children for life outside of the orphanage. They need to learn skills to equip them to live and earn their place in society and the community and we will help them with this. But we need more help and more volunteers and so we returned to the UK filled with ideas and plans to face the challenges ahead.

I know I am supposed to be impartial and unbiased, but I absolutely loved our recent trip to Lily. I am all fired up about the future and what TWO WEEKS volunteers can do to affect change and help the many, many, people in this one area alone. With each trip we learn how there is still so much more that can and needs to be done. And this is just one township in South Africa, let alone the rest of Africa. Sometimes it makes my head spin when I think about all the disenfranchised people in this world and how if some of us just take some time out to help, what a difference we can make, and yes, that difference can be made in two weeks. If you don't believe us, just look at the clinic that has been built at Lily. Talk to the house mothers who now will have a support group to deal with all the issues they come across in their work and lives, as suggested and started by the social workers on our team. Perhaps you should ask the little girl who came to Lily one night as well; I would like to think that we helped her in some way however small.

TWO WEEKS can affect change and now that we have charity status we are determined to spread the word and raise awareness as there is still so much to do and achieve. I would like to thank all the people who have supported us in so many ways and the core team of volunteers in TWO WEEKS that work so hard to enable individuals like you and me to make a difference.

So once again, watch this space and if you have a mind to help, whether it is with our operations here in the UK, in the Netherlands, or going on trips overseas, please join us and see just what you can achieve with TWO WEEKS.

Karen Patten, Chairperson