

28 January 2006

### A Personal Letter from Sister Hedwig

Didn't you think that Nkandla, ran out of electricity and post services also closed down that I did not communicate for so long? Fortunately all that is still in existence. I too am fully awake and active. Let me tell you what happened....

In 2005, that was November to December, I went to America in California in Irvine community. I was invited by a group of 5 people who had come to visit us after viewing the documentary on Orphans of Nkandla. They call themselves "The Africa Project". It was a wonderful experience to be there. The feeling to know that you are representing your poor community was a special one, but the journey was far too long!

Luckily, I was not alone. When these visitors came in July 2005, they wanted to visit our schools just to see how our schools are different from theirs. I took them to one of the local schools call Velangaye High School. The reason why I chose that school was that, I had 4 of my children from Sizanani in that school. So, I had a good contact with it and the teachers and the principal of the school is very understanding and supportive towards such children.

When the visitors came there, they were very impressed by the efforts made by that young man who was not even 2 years there as a principal. Within a period of those two years he had made such a big difference in that school. Many pupils of that year who were doing their grade 12, had passed very well, but the school is in a bad state.

Pupils are writing on their laps and 3 or 4 sitting in one desk and so on. So, the visitors were touched by it and they felt that he also needed to come along with me to talk about the plight of his school to their community. There are many children in that school who are orphans or vulnerable. He even feeds them from his own pocket and accommodates them where he lives with his family. The visitors wanted to help him but they had no means, so they thought coming personally might have an impact on the people of their community and thereby help. At this stage we do not know whether it made any impact or not because they will only start fundraising in March this year.

What we did there, was to make them aware of the plight of orphans and vulnerable children of our country with specific reference to the Nkandla community where only 10% of the people are employed, 49.9% living on State grants and 90% is obviously unemployed. We mostly addressed school children and some other groups. It was an experience for both of us to be there to try and give those interested people a picture of what is happening in our country. So, as they start fundraising in March, please help us pray that those people who can afford may continue to be touched and help out. What people of the first world countries call a little, we call big because it is sure to make a difference in someone's life in South Africa. The need to help is more than what one can do. Orphans and vulnerable children are added to the existing number every day.

In our hospital in Nkandla between April 2004 and December 2005 nearly 1,000 people have died.

We can do nothing to stop people from dying if that is how God has planned it. But what I strongly believe we can do, is to be there for those who are traumatised by the loss. To give emotional support, food - since it is the main thing even for the sick to boost their immune system in order to live longer and take care of their own children themselves. We can lessen the stress experienced by children, I believe, by sending them to school to be away from all these worries of watching their own parents dying in front of them because they cannot do anything about it.

It is not only people in the community are affected by the HIV/AIDS toll. On our way back home (America) from the airport, my sister phoned me to let me know that my brother had been admitted in hospital. I went to visit him. As I was there, I realised that he was soon going to leave us too. Since then I had been living in that anxiety until 28 December 2005, he decided to quietly leave us. During the time when he was sick, I had lost concentration and interest in anything and people, the only thing I had time for, was to nurse that anxiety. So we buried him this month. That was my third brother who had died of the related disease, so you can imagine what went through my mind day and night. It is not only my brother dying, there are many more people dying the same way by the same sickness -AIDS.

It was almost a week later, I was told my cousin had also died.

**If one goes into our hospital, one is shocked and asks oneself, how much long will this evil thing go on?**

**Every weekend there are funerals, those deaths includes the economically active men and women of our community such as the hospital staff, teachers and so on.**

When I returned home, I had to re-orientate my mind in order to be ready to write the examination on my Master Degree in Community Work. This was on the 20th. I am now left with my dissertation (research methodology).

As I was still enjoying the fact that the examination was behind me, the schools opened up for the new year 2006. I had to attend sending the children that needed help from us back to school. Mbali Mbatha, went back to her school St Victor boarding school to do her grade 10. Nobuhle Linda, that is the child shown in the film doing the household jobs because her mother was too sick to take care of the family. I also took Nobuhle away to a boarding school to be out of this traumatic life experience she had lived it for such a long time. Her mother is still not on Antiretroviral drugs because her CD4 counts are above 200, but she is sickly now. About a week ago, she was admitted with swollen legs and it seems one side is being affected. My fear is that, she should not get a stroke.

Mbali's brother Sne, also shown in the film, he did not do well the whole year at school. I then started doing a research on why is it so? I found out that, he was not getting proper time to study and proper supervision from the Aunt who had fostered them. Maybe she did not know better, so I took him to a boarding school as well with

Nobuhle. This is not where Mbali is, since Mbali's school is a high school. They seem to be very happy in their new school. There are also a number of other children from Nkandla in that school, so they are not lost.

At Sizanani, fourteen (14) children were placed into foster care families and some returned to relatives who had been prepared to do so. This is done by the social worker employed at Sizanani. Amongst the 14, only 3 are getting foster care grants. All the others are still the Sister's responsibility even when they are with their adoptive parents. One is just grateful that some families took courage to foster them. All the others are still awaiting for their grants to be processed by the department of social welfare.

This year, we have 20 children at Sizanani. Our problem is still about getting the department of welfare to speed up the process of placing these children formally through the court. As long as they are not formally placed, they rely on the help given by the sisters e.g. school uniform, food, transport money to school for those that are placed with families that are far from the school.

One of the blind children by the name of Zinhle (9 years) who stays at Sizanani and attends a special school, has improved a lot in her new school even though she still cannot talk or walk independently but her hearing is very good. She and another girl called Mbali who is a dwarf (13 years) are the only two children that one cannot imagine them getting an adoptive or foster care parents because of their conditions. Almost everybody who sees them feel sorry for them but taking them is a different story altogether.

Regarding donations we received the passed two years, we were able to send a number of children to school, give them food, buy them uniforms and attend to their other needs. Families like the Linda where Lindiwe, that is Nobuhle's mother shown in the film having lost her husband, Mbali and Sne and three boys who are child headed family got 3 roomed houses built for them.

The Zulu's, this is a family of a 12 year old girl who had never been to school till last year 2005. She is now in grade 2. She lives with her grandmother who is very sick and their live on begging from the neighbours or getting food from the Nardini Sisters. This girl lives with her grandmother together with a 6 year old cousin of hers, they live in a terrible place between mountains and forests as the only family. The 12 year old reported to us that during Christmas season in 2005, one night they heard some heavy footsteps around their old hut. The footprints when they were looked at the next morning, showed to be that of a lion. Some other people said it is of a leopard. I believe both are dangerous, so we are moving them from there.

Others who received a shelter are, Mpungose family, -a child headed family as a result of the death of their grandmother

The other family who receives shelter is a Sithole family. This one child lost her both parents and she lives with her grandmother. She suffered a severe TB. One morning, while the grandmother had gone to fetch water from the river, Gugu the 9 year old, started to get ready for school. She lit candle in search of her pen, suddenly the house

caught fire. As from that day, they were stranded as the grandmother relies on her old age pension R 780, per month plus the help she gets from the Nardini Sisters.

The other is the Nxusa family, a family of 6 child headed family. Luckily, on the 19th of January 2006, they managed to get a birth certificate of the younger children. So they are going to get State grants and we can move on to helping other children who will be more in need than those who will be receiving a grant.

The Sikhakhane family, 3 boys whose parents also died and the uncle left them. The first 2 boys are in grade 11 and the youngest grade 7. They are also getting a 3 room house.

These are some families who just received help.

The majority of the families need food, school fees, uniforms and funeral assistance as many die without getting any grants. Most of the people are concerned about getting coffins and transport to take the corpse home from the hospital. Many of them die in their homes, that is another story to be told. When one thinks of the trauma the children go through when looking at their parents dying at home.

There are many more stories that I can tell you but I stop her for today.

May god bless you for the support and the interest you have shown in the past.

*Sr Hedwig Maphumulo.*