

Working With Buskaid: Summer 2002

It has taken several weeks for my feet to hit the ground again after my extended trip to South Africa. The intensity of the experience, the wide variety of activities and the vast differences in life-style and attitudes have taken some considerable time to assimilate, and having returned to work the day after arriving back home has meant that many of the issues involved have had to be put to one side.

The abiding impression still remains that of the children. They are delightful, responsive, keen to learn and full of fun. What struck me time and again were not the differences, but the similarities in attitudes and behaviours between the children in the township and those I teach at home. It was often a shock, as I was teaching to look at the children and notice their black skin, and in the group lesson situation to hear them speak in Xhosa or Zulu, their most common languages.

Every afternoon, Rosemary Nalden who is the head of the project, would invite me to leave with her, from her beautiful home situated in the white suburb of Johannesburg called Parktown North, and climb into one of the most battered and dilapidated old cars I have ever seen, to dice with death on the M1 motorway into Soweto. I swear every other driver on the road thought he was practising for his formula one debut. The motorway system passes above the modern and stark high-rise city centre of Johannesburg and past enormous ranges of hills which I was astonished to learn were mine dumps; the city is rich from its gold and diamond mining activities. Diepkloof, on the outskirts of Soweto where the school is situated is faced by a massive dump, and many of the children have eye problems and bad chests, as when the wind blows the dust covers the township.



The school is modern and purpose-built in the grounds of a Dutch Reformed Church.



It was so strange on the very first Sunday of working there, to be giving my first lessons in one of the 6 practice rooms, and hear the most wonderful unaccompanied singing coming from the church next door. Although it was winter, the sun was strong and warm in the first few days, and during break time we sat on the wall and listened to what sounded like heavenly music. Weekends were always particularly busy because that is the time every child has a group lesson. We started at 9 o'clock with the beginners and worked through

the morning teaching four graded groups, and the afternoon, from 2 until 6, was spent with the main group whose music is heard on the CD. Twice during my five weeks there, the main group was involved in a gig during the weekend, so then it was a case of loading up the combis, led by the lovely chief driver Silas and heading off in convoy to sometimes far-flung locations.

Two of these gigs (there were ten in all whilst I was there,) particularly stand out in my memory. We played at the opening of the World Summit on the Environment, and having been given a sparse supper of chicken stew and rice in a make-shift tent, went into a fabulous marquee where the rich and famous were sitting around tables laden with every imaginable delicacy of food and drink. The youngsters played beautifully and Samson Diamond, who has just started studying at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, played his own arrangement of the music from the film of Schindler's List to great acclaim. A far cry from this was the concert



in a church deep in the heart of Soweto, where, when the Kwela music was played, the audience danced in the aisles. Jackey played the drum in a couple of numbers and the sound seemed to reverberate in every heart, and when Bafana laid down his viola and did a high-spirited and impromptu dance the audience went wild. I heard it said many times that these people have natural rhythm and harmony in a way that we don't. Yes, indeed they do, because they value and cherish this part of themselves as part of their heritage, and so should we; we have only lost our abilities because of our inhibitions and because we don't use that part of ourselves enough.

The journey back from that gig was a nightmare and one of the most frightening I experienced. Silas was not part of the driving team in the combis, and the convoy broke up. We had no idea where we were or how to find our way home, it was raining and we passed three bad accidents in as many miles, and white women driving at night on these roads in an unreliable car is really not a safe way to proceed. We had Lesogo in the car with us, but there was enormous relief when we finally found our way back to the school.

Mornings were spent doing office work in the well-equipped office adjoining the house. Learning new skills was an interesting experience for me, but there was constant hassle for Sonja and Rosemary. Almost every waking moment was taken up with the problems of fund-raising, as many of the children have private school funds paid for them by Buskaid. In the high schools there is a shortage of books, with some children sharing one book between five, and many of the children were as stressed out by their Matriculation exams as ours are by GCSE'S and A-levels.

Many of the backgrounds of the children are heart-breaking. I spent a lot of time with one of the students in the main group; she has lost her mother and step-mother from Aids. Bontle is part of a group of three young cellists, who attends one of Diepkloof's roughest secondary schools. She and her brother live in a three-roomed house with their unemployed father and factory working mother who finds it terribly hard to make



ends meet. I had such fun working with Bontle and the other two, Grievance and Neo; they were so bright and eager for any learning, and full of laughter and joy.



Silas took me on a journey around Soweto; a few of the houses are a comfortable size for a family. Most are tiny and cramped, with no trees, flowers or grass. Some areas had many people out in the streets during the day because there was no work, and it is a dreadful thought to know that every 3rd person is HIV Aids positive. Many of the houses are not even that, but squalid shacks made from any scrounged material, and every evening as we got ready to return, the air was filled with smoke from the cooking fires; no gas or electric cookers here. Electricity is often obtained illegally from the wires running across the streets, and in some places there is no drainage, so the waste runs into the streets.

It was strange to leave this environment and return home, to open the electronically controlled security gates which surround every house in Johannesburg, and to walk through the three barred and bolted entrances in order to reach the front door. First the beam had to be switched off; once, having inadvertently forgotten to do so, I set off the alarm and within seconds was surrounded by armed security men. Fortunately they believed me when I said I was English and therefore unused to these things. Spring was becoming advanced as I left; the weaver birds were making their nests high up in the castor oil trees and the jasmine was filling the air with exotic perfume.

It was so hard to leave, and I was so glad to be home. These children are delightful and won a place in my heart, and the friendliness and kindness I experienced from many South Africans, both black and white was heart-warming. I so much hope that one of the most beautiful countries in the world can heal itself, and allow all their children the right to full personal development and fulfilment.

When Africans are happy they sing;
when they are sad they also sing.

Christine Dittman

