

# Mekelle Blind School Newsletter

November 2009

Fresh from our second half marathon in London, Jan and I set off for Mekelle two weeks ago. The day after we arrived we went to the school on the local line taxi (Zero Hamushta for those wanting to travel!). Just after you walk through the gate a new music room has been set up. We were greeted by the sound of the keyboard (thanks to Great Ormond Street Hospital School) and recorders all being organised by the music teacher, Meseret, who we sponsored a little over a year ago.



It was fabulous to see and hear the kids involved and observe a highly committed and talented teacher at work. It is also brilliant that the music teacher position is now permanent and funded from within the school budget. It is a great example of your donations pump priming an ultimately sustainable provision.



## There are other successes too...

This year we have been funding a proctor. This is a carer for the children. It follows us finding that the school budget only made provision for one proctor and that this was a male. There was no female carer on site. As you will know many of these children are very young, a long way from home (some more than 600kms) and often very vulnerable. Even now the two proctors share 24 hour shifts, so one day in two there is still no female carer on site.

Whilst this is a great improvement we know that the school should have at least four proctors and it is now one of our most urgent goals to get the proctor roles incorporated within the structure. But there are already very significant improvements in the levels of care for the children. Gina and Christine's groups from Ireland and the USA have funded a nurse who is excellent and together with the proctor help and support the children far better than has previously been the case.



Just over a year ago Beth and Bryn organised a group of children from OSSA to dig over a vegetable patch behind the dining room. Gina and Christine installed a pump to take water from the bore hole to the vegetable garden and the result now is that there is a substantial vegetable garden of spinach and cabbage. We are told the children get vegetables twice a week.



Unfortunately we saw no vegetables being offered. We understand that they are cooked on some evenings but that is restricted because there is not sufficient money in the budget for oil to cook with. Cold macaroni with a hint of tomato seems to have become the staple. Not surprisingly, many children, including George (left), did not find the food attractive.

We learnt that the budget for food for each child is about 60p per day, so not much improvement here although the food was better presented and each child did have a cup of water with their meal.

### Other Successes...



The dormitories are clean, tidy and do not smell, the showers work, are clean and children report having two showers a week.

The sinks have been completed and are in use.

Aylesbury Vale Academy donated unwanted but new uniforms to the school. We took as many as we could and wherever possible tried to give them to the new young students who had little or no clothing. The nights can be cold and we hope they will use the sweatshirts them to give them some warmth in the evenings.

*The queue...*



*... and one of the recipients...*



### **What about the toilets?**



VSO with us funded the refurbishment of the toilets earlier this year. They look much better they have been tiled and fitted with new pans. But they still stink. The reason we found was that the refurbishment did not include new doors, nor any work on the waste pipe-work and there is no water supply into the toilet block.

We would like to finish this job but it will need more money and good on site project management to get it completed properly.

### **Water**

The story of the water goes on. There are four water tanks but only one is in use. This is because the concrete stands on which the tanks stand is crumbling and will fall down if it supports any more weight. This is a major concern that is complicated by the need to co-ordinate three separate agencies of Water, Health and Education and the involvement of several NGO's. It is on our list but it will require a concerted effort by the Regional Educational Bureau, the Wareda, and ourselves, Gina and Christine to finally tap the bore water and pump it to the holding tanks for use in the school.

## The Playground

Our thanks to those of you that donated money for this project.

There are 151 children at the school about half of whom are in grade 1-4. There are currently four swings built by Christine's group. Two are broken. Our goal is to build with local materials and local labour a robust playground for the younger children.



*The playground site*

We reached agreement with the Education Bureau and the Wareda that there should be a playground and Liz and Pete took design ideas out for discussion with the planners this week. The money to start the work is now sitting in the Mekelle bank account. We don't know yet what the full cost will be but would be happy to receive donations over the next six months that we anticipate the project taking to complete.

## Education resources

There is still a great need for resources. Of the 151 children in the school just over half attend mainstream schools. Unlike here the only support they have in class is a sighted friend to read the text book to them. They are obliged to copy notes using a slate usually at the weekend with the help of their friend. Currently no textbooks in Braille are available.

The school staff are keen for the children to have access to Perkins Brailers, currently there are eight in the school, five are broken. Ideally every child should have a machine but in the real world even a working set of ten would be wonderful speeding up the process of transcribing notes from their sighted friends. The school is also asking for canes, provision for these is not currently included in the budget. Slates and stylus' are the principle means of recording currently and in the harsh Ethiopian environment these are often broken so need replacing frequently. We are continuing to work to provide more and better resources to support the students and to support the teaching. If you know of any canes, Perkins Brailers or slates that are no longer used and can be given to the school we would be very grateful.

The resource room is in a terrible state and one of our next projects will be to support an education resource assistant who will take charge of the resource room and ensure the resources are available for the lesson as required by the teacher. We hope that this post like that of the music teacher would eventually be incorporated into the school budget.

Resources

*Rat and pigeon droppings in the resource room!*



Finally Asmellash is doing a great job at the REB. Gina and I met with him to co-ordinate our work with the school. A new committee will be established with Asmellash, Zewdi, Nigisti, Fessah, Solomon, and two students. This committee will examine proposals for the school such as the new playground designs and sanction all future development work at the school.



Asmellash is drawing up a new structure plan for the school for next year. This plan will set out responsibilities and accountabilities for the school. Currently Asmellash favours giving responsibility for the school to the Wareda. This decision will be in the hands of the Cabinet. Once it is taken budgets will be set in line with agreed structure, accounts will be kept, and leadership and management will be called to account. This will make a huge difference to the day to day running of the school and will be the beginning of our ultimate exit strategy from the school hopefully within the next five years.



Jan is making cards to support the school. They are small hand sewn Ethiopian crosses (made in Makelle) set into a greetings card. We hope to sell them at £3.00 per card. If you would like to place an order just email Jan on: [jan\\_draper@hotmail.com](mailto:jan_draper@hotmail.com).



For now our thanks to everyone for your continued support. Liz and Peter return next week and we will hope to send a supplementary newsletter before Christmas.

With very best wishes

*Ian*

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