



The Johannesburg School for Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children

Newsletter no. 1 2008



Gardening—more than just a life skill

“Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish and he will eat for life.”

It is with this idea that Beka teaches its pupils how to grow a vegetable garden. Gardening is an increasingly important life skill in a world where food prices rocket. It is also a valuable learn-

ing tool for both sighted and blind children. Through planting, maintaining and gathering of the crops, they learn about the circle of life as well as taking responsibility for the success of their project. The smell and texture of the plants help stimulate the blind children’s senses.

Crops include potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, spinach, beetroot and beans, depending on the season. The children register the development at every stage of the growing process, from planting and germination to when the produce of their garden is ready to eat, which is their favourite part! There is nothing nicer than to feast on home-grown vegetables.



Boipelo Motheogane and Bongani Madlala tend to their precious plants.



Dorah Mokoena presses the soil over freshly planted flower seeds.

Mission Statement

The Johannesburg School for Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children (Beka) is a firm believer of early intervention for children with visual impairment and other special needs. It fills the educational gap for primary school children with disabilities in greater Johannesburg through sensory learning so that they can explore and understand the world around them.

Tactile cookery lessons in our UN-improved kitchen

A once-a-week cookery lesson is a substantial part of Beka’s adapted syllabus. Volunteers Louise Barnes and newly-joined Melissa Banks take turns in making delicious and creative meals. The pupils are actively involved,

from younger children cutting vegetables to older ones stirring the pot or turning the oven on. They learn to work together as a team and to split tasks.

They have to trust others to do their job and also be reliable themselves.

By taking part in making their own meal, the pupils learn to appreciate food, because they realise how much effort is involved in making it. At the same time it is an interactive and fun interlude to reading and writing in the classroom.

lectures about the hazards of gas and electrical stoves as well as boiling water.



Katrinky, Obvious and Doreen learn to bake chocolate cake under adult supervision.



Nhlanhla and Boipelo work as a team to mix the right amount of ingredients.

Cookery classes can also be combined with burn prevention

Naughty but ‘nca’

In February the children of Beka took a trip to Kees Beyers chocolate factory in Kempton Park, Johannesburg.

The children were guided through the process of chocolate manufacture and learned about each of the stages involved in the production.

The young researchers were helping the preparations for the annual Chocolate Fest which was held in March and displayed a variety of chocolate including local and international delicacies (see page 2 for more).

Next Holiday Week:
30 March to 4 April 2009

Johannesburg's Annual Chocolate Fest raises funds to pay teachers' salaries

This year Beka held its fourth Annual Chocolate Fest to raise awareness of the school and to acquire funds to continue educating blind and disabled children. The event also celebrated the diversity of a product from the 'dark continent': Cocoa, the essential ingredient of chocolate.

Recipe for success

Sally Williams Fine Foods donated some of its internationally-renowned nougat smothered in dark chocolate. Geldhof Chocolatiers again lent the school its impressive three tier chocolate fountain and 10kgs of melted Geldhof Belgian chocolate for guests to dip fruit and marshmallows into (thank you, Linden Garden Supplies, for the fruit). Spar gave a selection of delicious own-brand chocolate products including Belgian chocolate Easter eggs, Italian chocolate wafer sticks, and chocolate milkshakes. Cadbury donated PS Bars, Bar Ones and large slabs. Good Hope International Beverages gave Chocolate Soya Shakes; Kraft Importers arranged for a contribution of Côte D'Or bouchées; Lindt provided a donation of chocolate Santas, snowmen and reindeer, which were shared with emergency services, and luxurious Lindt truffles. Unilever gave Ola Astro ice lollies. Other donations included choc-chip yoghurt from Parmalat, chocolate desserts from Marshalls' Foods, and vanilla chocolate ice creams from Vitafreeze.



A young visitor reaches up to the towering chocolate fountain

Everyone wants a piece!

The event also received an inspiring response from the local community. Melville's Mugg & Bean café gave its famous chocolate chip muffins and Melville's De La Crème bakery donated some scrumptious chocolate croissants.

We also received Greenside Bakery cakes, chocolate ganaché from Aromas in Killarney Mall, a Chocodore (Hyde Park) imported chocolate hamper, to name a few.

Staff and pupils from Auckland Park Preparatory School rallied together in support of our cause and collected an impressive mountain of home-made cakes, biscuits, brownies and other goods. We also received a plethora of Easter chocolate products from them.

This year's festival was a chocoholic's dream-come-true and eager visitors meandered from stall to stall, enthralled by the variety of chocolates.

The event managers' flexibility was tested when the heavens opened half an hour before the fest began, and the second-hand gazebos donated by On the Box PR company collapsed under this uninvited downpour. The stalls had to be moved inside the school building.

As the day progressed, the sun broke through and the stalls were gradually moved back outside.

Special guests

The Nestlé Smartie man, though smartie-less, entertained the children with his dances and games, and special guest Hein Vosloo from the hit TV show *Survivor SA* mingled among the adults.

The raffle saw some of the most impressive prizes the Chocolate Fest has had to date, including an all-inclusive luxury break for two to the Pafuri Game Camp, dinner for two at The Loft restaurant in Melville, Jenna Clifford designer pewter ware, brunch for two at The Grace in Rosebank, 7th Heaven beauty treatments, a Giraffe Centre African painting and a voucher for Stuttafords.

No chocolate goes to waste

Any chocolate that hadn't been sold at the fest was taken to St Peter's Anglican church on Walton Ave in Auckland Park and sold after its Psalm Sunday service. The congregation's appetite and desire to help, secured a roaring trade.

Volunteers and young burns survivor Oscar Hadebe then set up a stall at N.G. Kerk on 4th Avenue in Melville. Again the welcoming response helped raise some more funds for the school.

What was then still left was given to resi-

dents at Joe Slovo squatter camp in Coronationville, Jordan Old Age home, children on the Paediatric ward at Johannesburg Academic General Hospital, hospital staff at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, Brixton SAPS and Brixton Fire Brigade.

Usually Beka takes a tough line on sweet treats for our children; particularly those who are HIV-positive or for complicated children who require general anaesthetic for a tooth filling. But after the chocolate fest the children deserved a share of the chocolate they had seen and smelt for days.

'Til next time

Beka would like to thank all those who helped with this year's Chocolate Fest. Margot Bell helped with the project in a number of ways, e.g. arranging the Pafuri Camp raffle prize and a collection of Easter eggs, both from Wilderness Safaris. She invested a lot of time to help with preparations for the event, and her family put many hours in baking delicious homemade cookies.

Preparations have already begun for Johannesburg's 5th Annual Chocolate Festival to be held on Saturday 28th March, 2009.



The Nestlé Smartie man and his colourful costume entertained the younger guests

Beka needs your help! To become involved, please call 011 726 6529 or email firechildren@icon.co.za.

You could arrange for chocolate donations, take children on factory outings, help sales at the event, assist with collecting donations and much more.

HIV-related blindness as a result of improved Aids treatment

...a follow-up to the previous newsletter's introduction on blindness and Aids.

An epidemic of blindness: A consequence of improved HIV care? By Yan Guex-Crosier and Amalio Telenti, © World Health Organisation 2001 (Summary by Marietta Neumann)

HIV-related eye problems are common and 10 to 20 per cent of HIV-infected patients will lose their sight in one or both eyes as a result from cytomegalovirus (CMV) retinitis, a viral infection that causes damage to the retina. In most cases blindness in one or both eyes only sets in when the immune system is so suppressed that the CD4 count is below 50 cells per mm³ (that is 1/1000 of a millilitre). The CD4 count of a healthy person should be between about 1500 and 2000. If the patient is not having anti-retroviral treatment (ART)

for Aids, he or she will die a few weeks after going blind. In developing countries like South Africa, the patient may not even live to the stage where vision problems set in, because he or she may not have access to medicine when other opportunistic infections strike.

Opportunistic infections can be prevented or treated but if ART is not started at the same time, the patient's immune system will get worse and he or she will be increasingly susceptible to opportunistic infections.

It is recommended that HIV-patients with a CD4 count lower than 100 should go for regular eye-checks to detect CMV retinitis. If CMV retinitis is diagnosed it can be treated by intravenous or intravitreal (into the vitreous humour in the eye) injections of antiviral

drugs. ART needs to be started at the same time and once the CD4 count has risen to above 100 cells per mm³ the CMV treatment can be stopped. Other disorders could appear as a consequence of the infection. The cost of this kind of treatment is estimated to be at about R140 000 for one year (2001 figures).

The improved treatment for Aids patients leads to increased incidence of CMV patients; this seems paradoxical, but the reason is that ART helps prevent other potentially fatal opportunistic infections that may cause death before the CD4 count is so low that CMV strikes.

Please refer to the research section on our website for projects relating to this topic:

www.firechildren.org

Braille lessons for teachers and pupils

Tracey Smith of Blind SA has been teaching all staff members basic and advanced Braille. Some teachers already had some knowledge in Braille and welcomed the opportunity to freshen up their skills. The more advanced pupils also joined in the weekly afternoon lessons.

Braille is a six-dot alphabet system where each letter is represented by a combination of up to six raised dots or spaces. A Braille machine, such as the renowned Perkins used at Beka, punches the dots into special Braille paper in response to the combination of keys, which are pressed simultaneously (see picture).

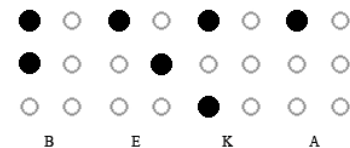
Braille letters are much bigger than print

letters the size they are typically in a book or newspaper. In order to save space, common words are abbreviated to between one and three letters. E.g. 'will' is simply written as 'w', or 'can' as 'c'. Common syllables are written in new combinations that do not represent any letters, e.g. the word ending 'day' or 'ing'. Nonetheless, a one-volume print encyclopaedia has forty-something volumes in Braille...

Braille is a stepping stone for blind people to keep up with the sighted world. It is a path to knowledge, and a way of sophisticated communication. It was invented by Louis Braille (1809—1852), who turned blind due to an eye injury as a child.



Nhlanhla (7) is already proficient in basic Braille.



Silver lining for Philisiwe

Philisiwe Ngidi (16) dropped out of her previous school, a government school for the blind, after being assaulted by fellow pupils. She started attending Beka in January 2008.

Her former school failed to deal with her case appropriately and she felt let down even by the police. But Philisiwe refuses to let the past drag her down.

In the friendly and unpretentious environment at Beka, the quietened teenager quickly turned into her old self—a bright and mischievous young woman, confident and willing to learn.

"I wish all schools for the disabled would treat the pupils like here", she wrote in an essay about the experiences at her new school.

Philisiwe has formed a close bond with her roommates, Katrinky (age 13, blind from glaucoma) and Doreen (age 11, a veld fire survivor).

Beka enrolled Philisiwe at Pioneer School in Worcester, Western Cape, for 2009. One of the most renowned schools for the blind in South Africa, we wish Philisiwe all the best for her future carrier.



Philisiwe (left) with her friend Doreen at a birthday party

Therapeutic music lessons stimulate the brain early on

Music is part of the national curriculum prescribed by the Department of Education, and as a universal language that has the ability to stimulate body and mind, it is given great importance at Beka. Catherine Ma, a qualified music teacher, writes about her experiences at Beka, where she has been doing musical activities with the pupils regularly for several months now.

I am a Kindermusik (child music) teacher wanting to touch children's lives through an early childhood brain development programme.

Each lesson contains activities which aim to stimulate every area of the brain using music and movement as tools. With continual brain stimulation of this sort, research has shown that children who use their home materials diligently and attend classes regularly, can reach a standard where they are two years ahead of their peers.

The Johannesburg School for Blind, Low

Vision and Multiple Disability Children aims to educate and counsel these [burned and/or blind] children, but also to offer that brain stimulation. As this is outreach, no home materials are given, however I have found that the children retain enormous amounts of information. For example, the children remember words to songs after hearing them only once or twice. They know what activity to do with their scarves and have the



Music teacher Catherine Ma calls for the children's attention

most unbelievable ability to play complex rhythm patterns with and without instruments. I attribute this to the compensation of other senses, which make up for the lack of full sight in some pupils to their love of music. Through swinging, swaying and vigorous movements, auditory memory and the cognitive side of the brain is developed, so with lots of this type of movement to music, these children help their own memory growth and problem solving abilities.

I have also noticed that they navigate their way easily around the room even amidst all the noisy excitement and bumping. When moving and dancing, their movements completely match the differentiation in music, whether beat or melody, slow or fast. They also want to be close to me, so I have up to four fairly large sized children competing for a position right next to me or on my lap.

It is a privilege to share in their development and joy. Thank you.

Two hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling children welcome

Mabontle Madonsela (7) and Obvious Ncube (5) joined the ever-growing Beka family in the third term of 2008. Despite their different backgrounds, Mabontle and Obvious seem to have made friends quickly and are often seen together on the playground.

Obvious was born blind in Zimbabwe, and his mother is still trying to get his documents sent over to South Africa. Obvious spoke no English when he first arrived, but has improved steadily since. As is typical for children his age, Obvious is curious and has endless questions about people and his environment. He enjoys cookery lessons and games where he has to identify ingredients through touch and smell. His favourite dish is "Grandma's Tuna Casserole".



Pretty as a picture—Mabontle (left) and Obvious play dress-up with Jenna Clifford's gift ribbons.

Mabontle, slightly older and more mature, arrived shortly after Obvious. She was also born blind but she had attended another blind school before changing to Beka. Her mother, a nursery school teacher, was dissatisfied with Mabontle's previous school and decided that a smaller, non-boarding school would be better. Although Mabontle could speak a little English when she arrived, she initially chose to speak in Zulu only and often chatted to Obvious in his language. Volunteers and teachers say that Mabontle has a warm and kind nature. She loves to sing "Baa Baa Black Sheep".

Mabontle had gained little Braille skills at her previous school but is determined to get better. Obvious now knows most of the alphabet in Braille.

The newcomers also had their first ever swimming lesson alongside their more experienced fellow pupils. Both were frightened at first, but felt encouraged by the happy splashing of their new friends.



A pleased Mabontle deciphers one of her birthday cards written in Braille.

Languages

Our school is able to support children in most South African languages as well as Shona. However, the language of instruction is English; we do not teach in Afrikaans at all. Extra murals are available after school in French (Tuesday) and German (Thursday).

Feleng Mahamotse and housekeeper Abigail Ximba prepare for a trip to Zürich, Switzerland for Feleng's surgery by attending the weekly German lessons. "Wo ist das Krankenhaus?" - "Where is the hospital?" is a good start.



Obvious and Mabontle harvest spinach from the vegetable garden.

Teachers' team is the strength of the school; their diverse backgrounds are our asset

Mortain Dube, 40, was the latest to join the Beka teaching staff. With 14 years of teaching experience under his belt however, he is far from a beginner. Dube studied for four years in Zimbabwe to achieve his primary school teaching diploma, in which he specialised in teaching science. He then went on to study a further one and a half years of Special Needs Education Training for blind, deaf and handicapped children, which included counselling and psychology for the disabled. In this course, he learned how to teach Braille and sign language. Since starting at Beka in January 2008, Dube's calm and friendly personality have made him a favourite among the children. Responsible and hard-working, he is now principal of Beka. He lives on the school site and next to being a teacher he is a counsellor and friend to the children.

Mai Claude Tem, 35, from Cameroon writes about his time at the school: "As a trained

"The teachers at Beka are among the most devoted group of people you will ever meet..."

- Pete Jones, volunteer from the UK



Mortain Dube, Oztie Mpala and Mai Claude Tem.

high school teacher who had only been teaching 'normal' students, my volunteering with Beka has given me the advantage to acquire some experience in dealing with disabled children. It has also given me the opportunity to be taught writing and reading of Braille which is absolutely a necessity when it comes to dealing with the low vision children and the blind. Working with the kids gives me great pleasure because they are so interesting, amusing and loving. And finally as younger ones, they deserve merit, help and attention for them to feel loved and that they still have life and hope."

Committed to Beka since December 2006,

soft-spoken **Oztie Mpala** has been teaching for 22 years. A qualified primary school teacher, Mpala is proud to have been part of Beka for so long and seen the improvements in both the school grounds and the children. "When I first came, some of the children had problems respecting authority and there was unconscious segregation between the blind children and the burned children who can see. However, through various group activities where they have to mix and work together, they have all bonded and learned to be kind to each other."

With regards to discipline, the children now even tell each other off when one of them is misbehaving, with little interference from the teachers. "Katrinky, Mabontle and Obvious' speedy progress has been especially gratifying to observe and to be a part of. They are eager to learn and absorb information quickly."

When Mpala first began teaching she didn't think she would end up teaching children with special needs, but is grateful for the experience. She would like to continue teaching blind and low vision children for the rest of her career.

Beyond the ordinary school day

From day one it has been Beka's philosophy that a child needs more than just daily lessons at school in order to thrive educationally and personally. With this in mind, school outings and afternoon activities take a substantial part of Beka's wider education.

The children have been to different museums, seen chocolate and cake manufacturers at work, learnt African drumming, seen and felt animals from a visiting zoo, scaled climbing walls, watched and heard the National Children's Theatre and even went to the Cradle of Humankind.



Blindfolded children feel a rabbit from EduZoo at Beka's annual Heritage Week in 2008, to develop empathy for their blind peers.



Rumbi Gumede tries a rhythm on her drum.



Nhlanhla Mpsi (7), who is blind, reaches the top of the Wits climbing wall.



Bongani Madlala, teacher Mortain Dube and Nsizwa Vilakazi are not afraid of big snakes! And fortunately the python wasn't afraid of them, or she would have squeezed.

The Johannesburg School for Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children

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We see your child's potential.



Donations can be made to:

**JHB School Blind, Low Vision
 First National Bank, Melville
 Branch code: 25 65 05
 Acc. no.: 620 502 081 59**



Katrinky (13), blind from glaucoma, loves playing the piano in her free time. She started school for the first time in her life, at the age of 11.

Recommended Reading:

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time.

By Mark Haddon





(ISBN 0-099-45025-9)
 Published by Vintage Books

His portrayal of an emotionally dissociated mind is a superb achievement... Wise and bleakly funny.

The hero of the story is Christopher Boone, aged 15, with Asperger's syndrome.

This is a form of autism and one of the conditions that is sometimes in pupils whose parents seek advice from our school.

Pearls and *Pimples*

	
<p>Pearls to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Linda Hampton, Julie Wellman, Simon Pike, Campus Outreach, for transport and caring. ◆ Margot Bell for helping with the Chocolate Fest, securing second hand school furniture and transporting groceries. ◆ Sissel Tengesdal, a Norwegian nurse, who volunteered to tutor one-to-one. 	<p>Pimples to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Passers-by who continuously give sweets and the like to the children despite the big sign asking them not to. ◆ Two middle-aged woman with time on their hands, who complain about the school's very existence—an example of the <i>Nimby syndrome</i> (not-in-my-backyard).
	

In the footsteps of Maria Montessori

Dr. Maria Montessori, author of *The Montessori Method*, *The Advanced Montessori Method*, and *Pedagogical Anthropology*, writes in her preface to *Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook*:

„Helen Keller is a marvellous example of the phenomenon common to all human beings: the possibility of the liberation of the imprisoned spirit of a man by the education of the senses.

“If only one of the senses sufficed to make Helen Keller a woman of exceptional culture and a writer, who better than she proves the potency of that method of education which build on the senses? If Helen Keller attained through exquisite natural gifts to an elevated conception of the world, who better than she proves that in the inmost self of man lies the spirit ready to reveal itself?”