

# Report: Collège du Léman SOA Charity Trip SOCH 2024

For the first time since 2018, the SOA Charity set off to visit and work at the new Serenje Outreach for Children's Help. A group of 10 students were led by Phil Shaw, accompanied by colleagues Janet Thompson and Mike Van Leeuwen.



This report will focus on the following points:

- 1 – The School ( a the infrastructure, b the grounds, c the staff )
- 2 – The Boarders ( a the children, b the staff, c the facilities )
- 3 – The Guest House
- 4 – Logistics of the trip
- 5 – The SOA team
- 6 - Projects
- 7 – Ideas/plans for the future

## 1-The School



### A -The Infrastructure

The building work that has been undertaken is very impressive. The current working classrooms, the pre-school class, grade 1 and the room for the children with disabilities are full of light ( effective design of windows! ), are spacious, the walls are covered with lovely displays and give one a feeling of a welcoming, happy place to be. The hand-made desks are perfect for the age groups. All entrances to the classrooms are accessible including provision for wheelchairs. The bathroom facilities are very good, clean, modern ( and functioning ! ).



The classrooms and bathrooms are cleaned every day and overall maintenance is good.

I was surprised to find that general and simple equipment was lacking – pencils, pencil sharpeners, exercise books and erasers.

#### B -The Grounds

The new classroom building construction is well under way and all will be ready for the new school year to welcome grades 2 -6. This clearly has been a huge investment and after discussions with Kamandete, the reasons for this are clear ( to be expanded upon in part 6 of the report ). These rooms have been designed in the same way as the current classrooms and collectively they create a structured and coherent campus. The overall design has made excellent use of the grounds while still leaving plenty of space for the playgrounds and recreation areas. Parents of day students are able to drive into the grounds to drop off their children without any issue. Perhaps once the school is fully opened as a complete Primary School, this might have to be reviewed. The overall impression is one of a sound and solid initiation of the project SOCH!

#### C – The Staff

The teaching staff were very impressive. The care and attention showed to all children were clear for all to see. The smiles on the children's faces coupled with their enthusiasm were testament to a lovely working environment. They welcomed us into their classrooms and discussed freely with the CDL students.

We were all particularly impressed by the teacher of the children with disabilities. (We have to hold on to her at the school!). Her name is Memory, and although not a specifically trained teacher for children with special needs, she has incredible patience, drive, and care. There are four children who are either completely deaf or hearing impaired and Memory is teaching herself sign language to be able to communicate and teach. ( Please refer to future plans in part 6 )

## 2 - The Boarders

#### A -The children

Currently, there are fourteen children who are living and being cared for at SOCH. Seven are the children with disabilities. There is ample space for increased numbers and plans related to this will be discussed in part 6 of the report. Physiotherapy takes place daily. They are fully integrated in the school and the day students play with them and involve them in activities during school time.

#### B-The staff

All the adult carers were wonderful, the children clearly have confidence in the people looking after them and we saw close relationships with all. The "hostels" were clean and tidy and the boarding house parents are there 7 days a week and sleep in the respective hostel. The new matron, Susanna, was ever present and super involved in all things – cooking, caring for the children, repairing clothes etc.

## C-The facilities

As mentioned above, the hostels were very well kept. It was heartbreaking to see just how few clothes and other items the children possess, and this caused a great deal of discussion amongst CDL students. The buildings have not really changed or developed that much and if we are to expand and welcome more children then, I think this is an area to look into. I recognize that the school has and has had to be the recent focus but if our fundraising is to be for the children we care for as boarders, then this should be a justifiable development for the future.

## 3 - The Guest House

We couldn't have been made more welcome at the SOCH Lodge. The staff were always on hand to help and provide services ( cooking, washing clothes). Our rooms were clean and cleaned regularly.

The state of the bathrooms was a cause for concern. Things worked but the loose taps, the state of the showers and toilets left a lot to be desired. However, this must be tempered by the fact that we are there for a week or so. The lodge is functioning and making money so the last thing one should do is impose "western standards".

Similarly, the kitchen is in a terrible state -the oven doesn't work, the freezer doesn't work, the shelves are in same state they were in 6 years ago. The same observation has to be made though in that no other guests will cook for themselves.

It remains a great place to stay being so close to the school, and it is a great education for our own students, who, by the way, did not complain once!

## 4 -The Logistics

Experience taught me that a great deal of planning is required well in advance, and this clearly helped for Botswana in particular, but also for the accommodation in Lusaka. The frontier between Zambia and Botswana is much easier and more efficient now, as long as you have the correct documents, which we did. I began the planning in September, basically 10 months before our departure.

The main issue for our trip was the bus. With the breakdown that occurred, I will not say that it put my students at risk, but the potential was there. Fortunately, this occurred just as we entered Kapiri and during the 3 hour delay, we had food, drinks, bathrooms. I do not want to imagine what would have happened if we broke down somewhere along the North Road...As a consequence, we entered Lusaka at night which was somewhat stressful. I will state that our driver was fine. However, for any future trip, I recommend Benmak as a company to use.

A further recommendation is to use a flight between Lusaka and Livingstone -10 hour bus journeys add a great deal to travelling time and although the roads were perfectly fine, not something I want to repeat.

I would like to make special mention to Mr Kamendete Chuma and Mr Kevin Gilbert for their assistance with the bus and for arranging new transport for us.

In terms of the time spent at SOCH, I really felt we had the correct formula. 8 Days allowed ample time for the projects and to establish relationships with the children. Equally, we had time for the visit to Serenje Boys School, the mosque and local church service. Our CDL students had time to adapt and feel comfortable going into town, the shops and market.

Overall, the 2 weeks was the perfect length of time for this complete trip.

## 5 -The SOA Team



As all of us who run these trips know, the participants and accompanying staff can make or break the trip. I was blessed to have two wonderful colleagues with me. Janet and Mike adopted their roles automatically and complimented each other perfectly. They had the complete respect of our students and had the perfect balance of humour, discipline ( hardly any was required ), guides, participants, visitors, guests and instructors.

Our students were incredible, simple as that. They took everything on the chin, didn't complain, listened, made suggestions, worked hard, laughed, cried and did not panic ( bus, IT Outage ).

It is so important to continue vetting applicants to participate. Staff have to be chosen carefully. For this trip, it could not have been better!



## 6-The Projects

The planned projects were to repair the original climbing frame, create a new playground area for the school, begin the garden and purchase 2 large tvs for the classrooms.



As often happens, there was a great deal of improvisation, so the swings were repaired and painted, the basketball court was painted, a new wheelbarrow was purchased, extra classroom supplies were purchased, two slides were moved to create the new playground and were painted too. Instead of the garden, construction began on pathways and wheelchair access around the new classroom buildings.

The symbols of continuation -the climbing frame and basketball court remain! During each CDL trip, these have either been repaired or added too and this year's trip was no exception.



Special mention must go to Francis the carpenter for his patience, help and sheer hard work!!

## 7-Future plans/Ideas

As stated earlier, the SOCH school has been initiated with a solid basis but in view of the huge investment and commitment that has been made, I believe the next school year will be pivotal. The current classes are not at capacity and the main reason for this, is that parents with several children, prefer to have them in the school. Very logical. So, with the new classrooms and the opening of grades 2-6, this should address that issue. I also believe that with our capacity at 30 students in a class, this should be really advertised as many other private schools have classes of 60 -65.

Another major contributing factor is transport. Competitive private schools have buses to transport students to and from school. This has been discussed before but having witnessed this ( seeing other school buses around Serenje – Kamandete or one of the workers, taking students home in a car ), I believe it should a plan to purchase a school bus. This will not happen overnight. An initial idea is the following -priority must remain to meet the budget requirements as laid out and communicated by Kevin. However, the yearly amount has reduced, therefore, any supplementary funds could be directed towards said purchase. Further to this, I have always seen increased funds raised when a specific target is communicated -I do not mean an amount of money but a clear objective. One or the plans for SOA will be to advertise this and, channel any supplementary funds towards a bus.

There is capacity in the hostels to welcome other children and Kamandete assures me that there are others in the surrounding villages who could benefit from our care. Therefore, SOA plans to formalize the sponsorship of children with disabilities. 300 chf, or euros or pounds pays for the care and school for a child for a year. We will develop a template for each child currently in our care and publicise the information ( To be decided how exactly ).

Related to this, the facilities for the children in our care need to be improved. I am open to a discussion on this point. Please note, this is not a criticism of Kamandete or his staff at all. If our focus is the welfare of these children, then their surroundings can be made better.

A further point of discussion is the training of teaching staff. We cannot impose western objectives but specialist online training for the teacher responsible for the children with disabilities should be a priority. I am convinced that we can provide this. In addition, advice regarding curriculum could also be something we consider particularly as we are moving very quickly towards a complete primary school.

A final point, I would like to thank Kamandete from the bottom of my heart for everything he did for us during our stay. I am sure that he was exhausted! His availability, flexibility, care and enthusiasm were all something to behold. His determination and vision for SOCH is evident in his passion and love for the place. With continued collaboration I am convinced that SOCH will be a success and will quote Kama to end....*WE ARE ONE*.



Phil Shaw 1 August 2024