



ROTARY CLUB OF ROSEBANK

BAMBATHA PRIMARY SCHOOL PLAY PUMP

A JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN

On Thursday, 7 August 2008, Caroline and I journeyed to Bulwer, in the foot hills of the Drakensberg, KwaZulu Natal, in search of the Bambatha Primary School where, with the financial aid of Rotary Clubs in District 1260, a playpump has been erected. The purpose of the journey was to meet with the school principal to gauge how best to use the surplus money to the benefit of the school which had arisen from the change in the exchange rate between the British pound and the Rand.

About 10 days prior to our departure I surfed the web address www.wheretostay to find somewhere to overnight so that we could arrive at the school the following morning when the "learners" would be at school. I inadvertently arrived at www.weathersa which reported knee deep snow at Underberg and Bulwer and the closure of Oliviershoek pass. Although we were experiencing typical Highveld warm winter days I was convinced Mother Nature would pull a trick on me and drop buckets of snow all over the countryside while we were in the Berg area. I made a note to take along a beanie, gloves and scarf – which I did. It was blowing a little in Harrismith and the haze was such that we couldn't see the Berg. In fact the closer we got to the Natal Midlands and the Berg the worse it got, the atmosphere being full of dust and smoke from grass fires for kilometres upon kilometres, typical of this time of the year I venture to say. I was reminded of Malawi and the thick, thick haze during the so called suicide months of September and October when storms build up day after day and never deposit a single drop of rain. The population would reach breaking point, tempers would flare and one of the most gentle people in Africa would snap at you for no apparent reason. Then it would happen one night; rain and clean the atmosphere like someone had just washed your windows and you could see outside again. While working on the new capital of Malawi I was fortunate to stay in a lodge on Zomba Mountain. In those days the only way up or down the mountain from the plateau below was by way of a single lane road where you were allowed to travel up from the base gate between the hour and 15 minutes past the hour, and down on the half hour and 15 minutes after. It normally took 15 minutes to do the journey. So waiting at the top gate for your turn to go down in the mornings, staring into the haze wondering what was beyond the thick mass of smoke and dust was a normal occupation. And then it did happen! The rains came and God washed the windows. The most amazing experience of seeing Mount Malanje for the first time rising so majestically into the blue Malawi sky, all 3 300 m of it, right in your face yet it was at least 20 km away, just as if God had plonked it down over night. What a sight! And the atmosphere as clean as a whistle.

That's what it was like driving along and peering over the tops of the trees through this thick purple blue haze into the valleys below, when you dared take your eyes off the road in front of you. But it wasn't only the winding road that made you keep your eyes on it; sheep, donkeys and herds of cows grazing along the side of the narrow road with not a herdsman in sight. What made it even more ethereal was the fact that both Caroline and I had head colds with blocked ears. I certainly could hear very little road noise so it was as if we were gliding along the mountain ridges way above the valleys, bearing in mind that we were still only approaching the Berg foot hills. And the temperature and snow? Huh! 22⁰ C all the way even when we arrived in Bulwer at 16h00, after a 5^{1/2} hour journey, including a lunch break in Harrismith.

We spent the night at the Mountain Park Lodge in Bulwer, olde worlde, but that's a story for another time.

At about 08h30 the next morning we set off to find Bambatha PS and when we went out to the car realized for the first time that there were mountains around us. The haze had partly cleared and the temperature was about 15⁰ C.



The school is probably only 10 km from Bulwer, passed Donnybrook, another Africanised colonial town.

Eventually, after passing it the first time, we went back to a gravel road turn-off and followed directions like: - "From here things get a little tricky even though the school is probably only 1 km away..... The school is off to the right of the road you turned onto.....If you travel more than 1 km along this road without turning off to *another* road to your right you have gone too far"!

At some stage, traveling at not more than 10 km/h in deeply rutted roads, (Africa is not for sissies) I took my hand off my masculine heart and stopped a passing bakkie and ask the driver if he knew where Bambatha PS was. He wasn't in the least bit rude. He pointed over his shoulder and said: "Do you see that bus depot over there? (300 m away). Well the school is just beyond it where you can see the water tank." We had arrived!!

In fairness to Carl Nienaber, of PlayPumps Africa, who sent me the directions, he did add: "Keep along this road for about 500 – 700 m and you should see the school and the play pump a little way ahead....If you get lost call me on ."

As we picked our way between the brown cows munching the dry winter grass on the football field, a young learner jumped off the playpump and ran and opened the security gate with a big welcoming smile. As we alighted from the car Ms Sylvia Dlamini, the Principal, welcomed us with an even bigger smile.

Sylvia took us into her cubbyhole office, sat us down at a little coffee table desk and told us about the school: 367 learners in 8 classrooms and 13 educators. Built in 1985 and added to in 1998, it doesn't look as if much has been done since then. They previously had a power wheel for drawing water but it didn't work. A power wheel, incidentally, is a pump that has 2 cranks on either side of the borehole pipe which is rotated by 1 or 2 people and draws up water from the borehole. Manual labour.



Prior to the installation of the playpump the children had to carry water from a long way off for drinking

purposes and also cooking when needed. That was manual labour! Even now there is no plumbing available in the school nor in the toilets and like everyone else in the school the educators draw water for drinking from the tank outlet.

We listened to her needs, her cry for assistance which was loudest when we talked about lack of adequate classrooms and basics like desks and cupboards. Up to 60 learners at a time in some classrooms. It was noticed that some educators didn't even have a desk to work from. They had a computer once but it was hardly installed when it was stolen. And security is a problem but Sylvia said that they would take the equipment home with them in the future rather than risk it being stolen again – if they only had 1 or 2; 1 for the learners and 1 for school administration. She even suggested that they could be left at the nearby shop where the store keeper had big dogs! That's desperation. Other basics like sports equipment, footballs for the boys and netballs for the girls, were in short supply if they existed at all. The cheap balls supplied are plastic and puncture on the school fence and are not worth mending. There were many more items which we listed.

After our pleasant discussion with Sylvia we were introduced to her Heads of Department and visited each classroom in turn being greeted by a well practiced chorus of: “Good morning, Educator.....” and more to add. We were introduced to the Educators in each class as “Brian & Caroline, the people involved in the playpump and tank.” There were only smiles of



appreciation and “Oh, Oh!” I think I even heard an Eish! But never a “Seriaas!”



We noticed that vegetable gardens were being prepared for the summer season outside the classrooms which in normal schools, as we know them, the area would be paved and used for assembly. The water is drawn into plastic watering cans and dispensed on the seedlings.



At one stage we asked if some of the learners could be let out of class to play on the Playpump so as to be photographed. We were nearly killed in the rush! The playpump is hardly noticeable in the photographs because of everyone’s enthusiasm to be included in the photo. But it is there. I saw it! One item that is still missing is the advertising boards on the side of the tank. Likewise the board with all the names of the participating Rotary Clubs. This will be addressed through PlayPumps Africa.



We were discouraged by Sylvia from viewing the toilets, 2 blocks of 4, divided up into boys and girls and juniors and seniors. In PlayPumps Africa Site Visit Report, it was noted that pit latrines were in poor condition. In some of the photos learners will be seen carrying buckets of water to the toilets 100 m away which we were told was for cleaning purposes which we surmised was for personal hygienic reasons and hand washing.



Caroline donated 6 boxes of biscuits to the school which were very enthusiastically received, especially by Sylvia who told us that the School Feeding Scheme vehicle had not arrived that morning. That meant that some of the learners would at least have a biscuit to eat before nightfall and dinner time.



Fellow Rotarians, we have no idea of the dedication of these teachers, of the sacrifices they make to teach under such conditions, day after day, and we can only be extremely grateful that in the first place there are people like that, prepared to assist the youth of the country in giving their all, and secondly that we were spared from those conditions.

So where to from now? We need to take a careful look at our budget, prioritise, determine who can best resource items of need and put a plan of action together, not forgetting that Bambatha PS is not just around the corner.