

T FOR HOPE

by Terry Farrell • photograph Vida de Voss

FOR SOME, HAVING EXPERIENCED POVERTY THEMSELVES, THEY GATHER FOR THEMSELVES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY ARISES.

For others, their first-hand knowledge of hunger, cold, and a lack of prospects form the foundation of their drive to help those in need. This is the story of a Kavango girl whose love for her people means remembering them.

I was born in Siudiva village, on the border between Angola and Namibia along the Okavango River. It is unimaginable to me that anyone experiencing the landscape won't also immediately fall in love with it – especially the peace and calm from the river. This is a slow world where multilingual and friendly people daily cross the river between Angola and Namibia. This is also a world where happy children laugh and play as if they had eaten the night before. Despite having had the opportunity to move beyond this world of beauty and poverty, I find purpose in raising my children and ploughing back into my region.

The Kavango regions are well-known for being severely affected by poverty. The communities are quite rural and many households have neither access to electricity nor toilets. The majority of the adults are farmers with limited education and it seems from the lack of parental involvement at schools that

parents do not value the education of their children either – especially that of their daughters. Girls drop out of school to help their mothers at home or they find themselves in child marriages as a way to support themselves and their parents. Those children that do finish school generally move to Rundu or Windhoek and visit less and less. At the loss of these children with earning potential, those who remain behind are the old, the very young and those who waste their time at shebeens.

Economic activity, mostly driven by women who engage in catching fish with traditional baskets, selling fruits, sweets or fat cakes on the streets, is scarce. And despite the natural beauty of their surroundings, negligence and hunger are obvious in many children.

In 2003 I decided to try and do something about the poverty and neglect that confronted me ever so often. I mean, I was born Theresia Markus, a near namesake of Mother Theresa. As an entrepreneur (co-owner of Guest House Bavaria at Rundu), I recognised I was in an ideal position to help others if I wanted to. With the help and support of my husband, I wanted to show some care and love towards these neglected children. I decided to start a Kavango Christmas project. I wanted to model to the parents that children need to know that someone loves them and cares for them. The familiar picture of



children left alone at home during Christmas with nothing to eat broke my heart every time. The older siblings (commonly between the young ages of 8 and 12) have to take care of their younger siblings while adults go out to celebrate Christmas. With the help of many, the Kavango Christmas project was a success. We fed around 400 children and provided them with toys. Support for their food came from OK Foods (Rundu) and Metropolitan Namibia (Rundu branch) and toys were donated from the USA with the help of my in-laws (Judith Farrell and Colleen Harlan) as well as sisters from a Catholic Church in upstate New York. With the help of my mother, brothers and my children, we made Christmas memorable



for numerous children for the next four years. It was important for me to involve my own children in the preparations and execution of this Christmas project so that they could realise their fortune of having loving parents who show them care in tangible ways.

The project ran until 2007, when it was clear that the community didn't appreciate what we were doing and thought we were simply administering government handouts. People's entitlement and aggressive grabbing of toys came as a shock; it was a serious disappointment. But this experience became an important lesson and moved me towards my next project.

For the next two years I worked

with the Cancer Association of Namibia to do Pap smear tests with women. This wasn't easy, as most women have never heard of it and others actively tried to dissuade others from going for these check-ups. It cost myself and a registered nurse to go on to the local Rukavango radio station to explain the procedure and its safety. This was once again an uphill experience.

I gained perspective in 2011 when one of my cousins died a frightening death. She used to spend most of her day at the river in order to regularly wash because she did not have a toilet at home or products to use during her menses. A crocodile seized the opportunity to attack this vulnerable woman and mother of a two-year-old. This was a wake-up call. I was busy with the wrong projects.

I started asking teachers and girls questions to better understand the situation girls face during their menses. What I learned further strengthened my resolve to help where I could. The unknown reality to the privileged was that girls resorted to using cloths, material from mattresses, and more damaging – even sand and crushed leaves that they inserted into their private parts as one would a tampon. Alternatively they would spend most of their day at the river as my cousin did. Having to deal with possible spotting and being made fun of and missing school are contributing factors that lead to girls dropping out of school – not to mention possible involvement with blessers or pressure from parents to get married early. How could I stand by and see our girls lose out on an education and future due to no fault of their own?

Thus began an interesting journey of getting to know a number of women who seemed to have a good answer to this problem. I learned about a woman named Rachel Starkey. She ran a project producing reusable pads for women and girls who couldn't afford disposables. She sent me a sample. Getting hold of the material to produce it locally became a big challenge as I couldn't find it in Namibia! I was stuck. My reusable pads idea was then put aside and education empowerment commenced.

In 2015 and 2016 I was involved at Kanuni Haruwodi Primary School to

help improve Grade 10 performance and especially to advocate amongst parents the importance of girls receiving an education as well as boys. With the help of Dr Komu and an exchange at St Boniface where pupils learned how to approach their exams, the pass rate at Kanuni of 3% in 2015 increased to 33% in 2016. It felt like my efforts were finally starting to pay off. But my heart still bled for the young girls that missed school and endangered their health during their menses.

In 2017 I was joined by Mrs Heather Ross Kamwanyah. Thus was born Sisters of Hope, Namibia with the intention of finding ways to create comprehensive and sustainable ways to improve the lives of the women and girls in the region. We learned about Sister Namibia and their SisterPads project. From first-hand experience we knew girls needed more than pads and education around menstruation. We thus came up with the idea of 'pads plus' by which we wanted to connect all community resources to assist girls succeed in their education. We received support and donations from Sister Namibia and International Women's Association of Namibia (IWAN). Sister Namibia donated 56 SisterPads kits to the Kanuni Haruwodi School while the International Women's Association Namibia donated 20 SisterPads kits as well as N\$5000 towards material for the Kavango Pads production. Yes, we were not only going to provide donations to the girls but also help their mothers, older sisters and aunts become local producers and thus have an income generating opportunity.

Two other little successful projects include linking the Windhoek International School with Kanuni as a sister school to assist with improving school results. IWAN also responded to my search for donors for the Kanuni Haruwodi Kindergarten by donating 6 tables and 22 chairs to kids who sat on the floor in all weather conditions.

As a founder of Sisters of Hope Namibia, I strongly believe, that if we want to fight poverty, we need to first empower and educate women and girls so that the mothers of the future are able to better educate and take care of their children. ♀