

A Dream Realized: The Fairfield Children's Home

"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." John 13:34

In June, 1996, a class of students from Nebraska Wesleyan University traveled to Zimbabwe on a study tour. After spending time at the Fairfield Orphanage at Old Mutare Mission, two of the students, Christie Ahlschwede and Jennifer Lentfer, developed a special interest and returned two years later with other graduates to work with the orphanage staff. Soon, students from Africa University (AU) joined them, putting their expertise and education to use in service of the children: Henry Otieno from Kenya, Americo Moniz from Angola, later Michel Lundulav Okitakoy from the DRC and others. A club, "The Fairfield Buddies", was established on the AU campus. It was made up of young men and women who gave their time and talents in the role of big brothers and big sisters. After returning home, Christie and Jennifer established Fairfield Orphans Student Association (FOSA) and membership grew to include interested persons of all ages. FOSA raised funds through an advanced special established with the Nebraska Annual Conference.

In January, 2002, a small group of individuals came together for a long weekend of dreaming and planning, all of whom, had made repeated visits to Old Mutare over a number of years and had a special love for the children at Fairfield. This core group included the two former Nebraska Wesleyan students and some of their family members. While visiting Fairfield, we had come to know and admire the dedicated support given to the children by Mai Nyandoro and the Missioners of Hope, Mai Nyauchi and Sekuru Mukuzvazva. It was only later that we came to know the beautiful history of Fairfield through the lives of Mbuya Bjorkland, Sister Alice Whitney, Sekuru Rapi, Sissi Angie, Chief Marange, Sister Rudo Kapenzi and others. Our love for the children made us believe that we too might have some part to play in the ongoing story of Fairfield; therefore the theme for the weekend together was: What can we do to contribute to improve the lives of these children and their futures?

At the time of our meeting, there were 40 children living in a small building in the Old Mutare Hospital grounds near the maternity wing - a legacy of the original purpose of the orphanage which was to care for babies whose mothers had died in childbirth. The orphanage was an institution-style facility with all the children living together and uniformed hospital staff caring for them in shifts. The buildings and furnishings were growing old and it was difficult to find maintenance support. There were broken windows, one rusty bathtub with little running water, lopsided cribs and almost no toys. There was not enough staff to keep up with wet diapers, runny noses, cries for attention and the need for holding and comforting. New babies coming into the orphanage were put into a room filled with cribs until there were old enough to sit on their own; Far too many babies were lost in this room. Among the older children, there were fighting and other displays of unhappy behavior associated with the need for one-on-one attention. It was a policy that children could stay at Fairfield until they were five years old. Then they were to leave the other children - the only family they had known in their lives; this was difficult and painful.

Together with Mai Nyandoro, the Missioners of Hope and Nicole Windhurst, a missionary at Old Mutare from California, we shared a vision of these children living with mothers in a more normal home setting,

a place where they could grow up in a family. Old Mutare Mission agreed to support the building of a set of homes to replace the hospital building and our group, now established as the FOSA Board, agreed to provide the financial means for doing this and to support the families once the homes were built. Each home would have a mother, an auntie and a group of children of different ages.

To fulfill the financial side of our commitment, FOSA set up a child sponsorship program under the new name of Fairfield Orphanage Sponsorship Association (still FOSA). Judy Ahlschwede (mother to Christie and also a long time friend of Fairfield) was invited to serve as the first FOSA president. Today the FOSA Board is made of 13 people, a Zimbabwean liaison, and an administrative assistant, all of whom reside in the US and then the Fairfield Advisory Committee (FAC) in Zimbabwe.

FOSA began the work of sharing information, fundraising, and working closely with the General Board of Global Ministries and also with our sister board in Zimbabwe established by the Zimbabwe Annual Conferences. The next three years were filled with many challenges and obstacles, as Zimbabwe's economy spiralled out of control and the cost of the project tripled. It seemed that for every step we took forward, we took two backward. It was a period filled with faith, hope, tears and constant prayer for guidance, patience, courage and for the strength to endure. The times when we were most discouraged, God would lift us. And always, always, it was the faces of the children before us that kept us going. Each of us had spent considerable time at Fairfield over the years and we knew every child by name and by personality. Although we lived on a different continent, the children had become part of our own families. Email and telephone enabled us to keep up to date with their individual development and we continued to travel to Zimbabwe to spend time with the children and to help the home building project grow. We also knew each of their caregivers personally as friends and were able to share these friendships with the 115 sponsors now on our list.

Then the day of great joy came - the 12 new homes were complete and the families were moving in! Some of our FOSA Board members were fortunate enough to go and witness the results. There are now altogether 77 children living in eight homes as families with mothers and aunties, just as we had envisioned. The babies that once lay in the crib room now have mothers to carry them on their backs. Behavior problems are fading away and the children are visibly more emotionally secure. The older children, who now live in the homes as long as they need to, are doing better in school. Health problems are easier to control. The children sang a welcome song to us when we arrived about having a "musha", a home with a family, about whom they can be proud. Dr. Manyeza, who has supervised the project from the Old Mutare Hospital and has witnessed the changes, says "You can see the hand of God at work." Significantly, the name of the orphanage has been changed: it is now the Fairfield Children's Home.

As conditions improved for our children, they grew much worse for the rest of the country, with the devastating spread of HIV and AIDS and the deteriorating economic situation. The FOSA Board formed an Emergency Relief Fund as an extension of our contribution to the Fairfield children, so that we could support the work of the people. One of these remarkable people was Mrs. Fireyi Sithole Chimbo who worked voluntarily in the farms and villages surrounding Old Mutare with children in desperate need. In one of these villages, there was a tiny two year old boy named Tadiwanashe who was very ill. The

villagers prayed for him, asking God to take away his pain. Their prayers were answered. He was buried in little green pajamas provided by Fairfield as his family sang “Jehova Mufudzi Wangu,” which means “The Lord is my shepherd.”

FOSA members are committed for life to helping the children at Fairfield. As we think of the future, one of the questions we are sharing with our Zimbabwe Board colleagues is: How can we ensure that when they grow old enough to leave, they can always come home? What will be the practical implications and is there something we could learn about this from the experience of other children’s homes around Africa? We have also been discussing the career development of these children and the possible need for securing places in a technical training school or college – another large financial project and responsibility that would require more capacity than we currently have jointly with our Fairfield Advisory Committee.

The children’s mothers must be central to this and any other planning for their children’s future. It will be important for our two sister groups to move away from thinking of Fairfield primarily as an institution and instead seeing it as the children see it – as a family home. As in any other family, the parents, who know their children best and who most have their interests at heart, have the primary responsibility and right to guide their children. Those of us who support the mothers must be keenly aware of their welfare too. At present each family has 10 children, some of whom are infants. This would be a very difficult task for any mother and it leaves her without much time to herself and often without adequate sleep at night.

As we look to the future of Fairfield, we see the Fairfield children growing into productive adults and more children taking their places. This cycle is precious and challenging, but, with God’s help and with a focus on each child, this future is very bright. Our sponsors are key to this success, so we pray that you will continue with us or join us now for this amazing journey.