



The International Soroptimist – December 2009 edition

Sparkles of Hope with Project Sierra

“There is nothing in the world more exciting than seeing someone whose eyes have regained the sparkle of hope: a mother who sees her children healthy and well-nourished again, back in school with clothes on their backs; a child who feels loved again, and safe and secure; a young girl mother who has been reconciled with her family and no longer needs to live on the street.”

These were words of Rick Foulsham, Hope and Homes for Children’s Chief Executive, in his September letter to President Hanne and all of you.

I experienced that excitement when I was privileged to visit a Saturday class at Project Sierra’s “children living alone” programme recently. The programme has refocused under Lois Kamara’s leadership to strengthen support to highly vulnerable youngsters found living on the street. Seventy girls and boys, some as young as seven years old were enrolled in September. Many had been identified by HANCI-SL staff going at night to places where children sleep rough, and building trust with them. The first priority was to re-unite the child with her or his mother. Support focuses on strengthening family relationships and giving the child stability and opportunity in the home.

The phrase “tough love” came to mind during group counselling with the mixed group of girls and boys aged 7 to 16 years. It was lively and interactive, covering “Personal Hygiene”, “Love Language” (don’t worry, this is code for “showing your mother you care for her”!), “HIV/AIDS awareness” and “Building Confidence”. The nervous were encouraged, cheeky ones admonished and the message of “respect for self and others” drummed home. No-one’s attention could wander under “mummy” Lois’s eagle eye! A fun session of song, dance and story-telling followed, with youngsters performing for their peers. Then lunch, served by the prefects - a senior girl and boy; and a rota of others for washing up. The children’s final task was to decide next week’s daily lunch menus –those attending nearby schools come for a meal after class.

Most moving, however, was meeting some of the mothers. The Project requires that the mother drops off her child at the Saturday class – i.e. the child must come from home. A programme of workshops for carers is planned, but when the mothers first met “at the school gate”, they themselves decided to meet regularly as a support and monitoring group. One said: “It isn’t right that only others show an interest in my child’s welfare. I must show you that I too want to care for her.” These women shared their stories of

deprivation, lack of stability and role models in their own lives that made it hard for them to cope. Without exception, they were amazed at the programme's early impact – on their child, and on their own attitudes.

It is early days for this new Project Sierra group, but the signs are already promising. To end with Rick's words: "Thank you so much for everything you are doing to support Project Sierra. Together we really are bringing hope and a sustainable future to many such women and their children."

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December 2009