



“LEAVES OF HOPE” FOR BELARUSIAN CHILDREN
REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 1077872

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

19 November 2008

Chair's Report

The traditional function of chairs is to give a general overview of the work of the Charity for the preceding year. They tend to report, inevitably rather tediously, on everything! ‘Leaves of Hope’ though, is not a traditional Charity and Val is so much more creative. She is able to bring it all to life through her wonderful DVDs. So as in previous years we have agreed she will do her bit and I will fill in about our project work.

Last year I said I would not be seeking external funding for another project. I felt that after the successful fostering project and then the prevention project I had done all that I could for Belarus and that, while I would stay involved with Val, supporting her in the work in the orphanages, my active involvement would be minimal. But it hasn't quite worked out like that! Others have had different ideas.

In February this year I took John Dixon, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Adults and Children's Services, and a Marianne Griffiths Chief executive of a local hospital Trust, to Minsk to show them what their investment had achieved. It had taken a lot of courage and belief in the wider value of such a partnership to support the projects, and to convince members of the County Council, and managers worried about their budgets and meeting Government targets that it was worthwhile to allow staff to second staff to train in a country that isn't, to say the least, held in very high regard. I wanted to demonstrate just how much that vision had been valid. I am glad to say they were impressed! Reporting back to Members John said

“We were blown over by what has been achieved”

He and Marianne immediately held a big fund raising event in July ‘to help us to continue working possibly for another 2 years’! The event was wonderfully successful. The rain held off, the children were happy with a variety of organised play activities – all within sight of Mums and Dads – and it was a really happy family occasion. Anne, Susie and Nicky were all there to help. Anne (and her daughter) was great with the children while Susie and Nicky helped serving food and briefing guests about our work. What is utterly astonishing, and great for us and the children of Belarus, is that we raised an astounding £10,000.08!

It immediately provided an opportunity to think about other ways of encouraging more child centred approaches for children especially those with disabilities. So I talked to Val and returned briefly to Minsk in August to explore possibilities.

According to official statistics during the course of our project the rate of abandonment fell from 500 p.a. to 300 p.a. We do not claim that this was solely

as a result of our intervention as we are aware of other influences at work but the bottom line is that 300 is too many and there are still many occasions when it can be prevented by the intervention of the project workers. We have agreed, therefore, to maintain this service at a reduced level. The project workers will continue to be available to maternity hospitals to offer material and emotional support and information to vulnerable Mums.

In addition we are going to build on Val's work in Zhodino to extend befriending for children in Orphanages who have no contact with their families. We have identified 2 other orphanages keen to work with us and are going to begin preliminary discussions with them as soon as possible. We want to encourage families to do what Val has done with Ilya, to get to know specific children and befriend them by either visiting regularly, inviting them to tea at home and, when the paper work is processed to spend weekends with them. We are aware that similar ad hoc initiatives are gaining currency in a number of areas of the country but Minsk has been a bit slow in becoming involved.

We are confident that attitudes in orphanages are changing and there is a willingness to consider trying different ways of caring. The time is right to try more informal approaches. The concept isn't new and we hope others will share their experiences with us. We have written a simple project proposal and will seek the approval of the relevant Ministries, and support from UNICEF and key individuals to ensure that our work (as with the fostering and prevention projects) becomes embedded in national child care policy.

As before an essential element of the project will be training programmes for orphanage staff and potential family befrienders. We need to ensure we do everything possible to ensure safe and successful placements. We still have our wonderful team of trainers who are keen to be involved. There were lots of warm accolades in the evaluation about the quality of the training and the calibre of the staff who'd been involved. We are still totally committed to providing a 'quality product'.

As with everything though, it depends on money. The weak dollar over the past four years has ensured we have had more than enough money to cover salaries of the project workers and our training courses but that is no longer the case. The disastrous economic situation has also affected us. We are so careful with our hard earned money but air fares are expensive. We are continuing to explore other possible sources of funding but Trust Funds have also been hit hard by the downturn in the economy. But we remain optimistic

I end as always by saying an enormous thank you to everyone. There are too many people to name individually, but to everyone who helps us raise money, who gives their time freely, who support us and work for us, our wonderful trainers and sponsoring organisations including West Sussex County Council, the National Health Service, our anonymous donors, our tireless Trustees, our trainers, our co-ordinators in Minsk – Valentina and Luda, and of course a very, very special thanks to our own very special founding Director – our own uniquely special Val.

Thank you everyone

Margaret Bamford

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