

Trip to Cheryl's Children's Home, Nairobi, Kenya – June 25 to July 5, 2011

Kenya Build Team members:

Basil Love, his son Cian (18), and his niece Grace O'Boyle (20)

James Nelson, and his niece Claire Wood-Martin

Maeve Coghlan

Greg Gillespie

Rowena Ryan

John Harding

This was my second visit to Cheryl's Children's Home in Nairobi. The first was in 2009, during which the majority of my time was spent at The Rurita Shade Orphanage; this year's visit involved less construction work and greater emphasis on painting ceilings, floors and walls, and there was significant interaction with the children which, in the main, did not happen at Rurita.

The majority of the team was scheduled to arrive on Sunday morning, but because of my different starting point in Sydney, I arrived on Saturday. Knowing the people there, it was a far easier introduction to life in the orphanage than the first time, and I was given a very warm and tactile welcome by everyone. The orphanage is home to just over 70 children, most of whom have lost parents to AIDS. There are other reasons for being there – parents being burned alive in a locked church by rebels in Eldoret many years ago, the closure of other state-run orphanages due to lack of support, and one rather special case upon which I shall elaborate later. Many of the stories one hears are pretty harrowing. I think it is fair to say that Cheryl's stories are not for the squeamish – some I do not wish to even contemplate. It's sufficient to say that any human would be incredibly moved and stunned to know that young people (some of them barely toddlers at the time of arrival at the orphanage) could manage to survive the trauma of their early years and yet still look so delighted at the arrival of their visitors. I thought it would be best to try to provide a chronology of the parts of the visit which stand out in my memory the clearest, so here goes.

Saturday I spent the majority of my time after arrival introductions and re-acquaintances by rolling out chapattis in the kitchen with Geoff (Geoff the Chef). I think we made a little over 200 for the children's dinner that evening. On this occasion Geoff was working in the actual dining room, rather than in the small dark kitchen adjacent. He uses two wood burning stoves, on top of each of which is a small convex metal plate. The smoke fumes alone are enough to suffocate, and he does this each weekend, it seems, for four hours. And that's after making the dough and mixing it in an enormous plastic container as soon as he arrives. It was served that evening with boiled lentils and maize, and by all accounts it's considered quite a treat by the children. Every day you will see staff members chopping kale into tiny pieces or sifting through maize kernels, sitting in a chair and holding the vegetables in their hands – there are no luxuries like chopping boards in Cheryl's. Washing up is done outdoors from a large cold water tap in the yard.

On Sunday morning, while I was still in the hotel nearby enjoying a breakfast cuppa, the others arrived. Having not seen James or Maeve since last December, this was a rare treat for me, and we gabbled to catch up. I had only met Claire once previously, but it was very easy to pick up where we left off last time I saw her. I then met those I had not seen before (Greg, Cian – which is pronounced Key-an - and Grace), and it was clear from the outset that this was going to be an especially close and tightly-knit team. Greg had the draw of The Pied Piper when it came to leading 'community singing', and the three younger members seemed to have their own irresistible magnetism when it came to attracting the younger children, many of whom would literally cling to them constantly when they were available. After breakfast, we were taken to Kibera slum, the notorious source of so many of the children. It is a depressingly dirty, smelly place, with open sewers containing endless detritus of all varieties. It's also dangerous, and in order to tour the place, you need to engage armed guards. Thus we were guided around by a pastor walking shoulder to shoulder with a soldier bearing a very intimidating machine gun over his shoulder, with another similarly equipped soldier bringing up the rear. All along the way, endless children walk up, sometimes touch your arms or hands, and shout out 'Ow are you?' The normal response would be 'hello', to which the standard reply from the children is a very clipped 'Fine.' – quite an odd dialogue, but totally disarming and amusing when you are on the receiving end of it. I have never seen a child outdoors in Kibera who does not look robustly healthy (and in almost all cases, devastatingly attractive). Some are initially shy, but just crouch down and smile, and you get the most engaging smile back. The pastor took us into two 'houses' – these were barely 8 feet square corrugated iron lean-tos with dirt floors in which there might be a chair, and behind the curtain, a bed. One abandoned woman had been, we were told, 'blessed' by having six children in these surroundings, and was currently eight months in arrears in her rent (payable to the Kenyan government) – at Kenya Shillings 1,000 per month, it is nothing short of an outrage. I felt uncomfortable and intrusive being in her home, meagre as it was, and I can still conjure up the vacant, soulless expressions on the faces of her and her children. I am accustomed to having boisterous, inquisitive, and vital youngsters around me – there is something inherently unjust and troubling about seeing toddlers bored to stupefaction by their surroundings, especially when you know that their future prospects are sometimes next to nothing (unless they are forced into a life of prostitution or crime).

The next day, we set to work. During the course of the visit, we collectively painted a classroom from scratch, repainted the main dining room, repainted one of the girls' dormitories, and scrubbed and

repainted the lower parts of the external walls in the entrance yard. I remembered last time how painfully scrawny the paint brush bristles had been, so took a supply with me. Basil had also bought some, so the painting was actually a far easier task this year than in 2009.

Mid-week, Basil took us on a trip to view the kind of situation in which the younger dispossessed Kenyan youth find themselves. This was to be a pretty momentous trip on several levels. Firstly we were driven through unbelievably chaotic traffic to a rubbish dump which sits adjacent to the Dandora slum, where Basil knew there were a number of teenage youths living by scavenging amongst the disposed-of rubbish. The slum is close to the centre of the city. The 'road' in was an adventure, to say the least, being a dirt track full of huge pot-holes and in many places still flooded from the downpour of the previous Saturday; I can still see Maeve's distant face in the second vehicle, as she held both hands to her cheeks in horror. More than once I thought we were stuck, but somehow our driver managed to negotiate the track until we came to a halt. We then walked to the area where the teenagers 'hang out'. The site was flanked by huge mounds of wrapped rubbish, and in the centre was a frame from which hung a set of scales. The youngsters collect plastic containers which are then weighed, and for which they are paid. Unfortunately, the going rate is insufficient to buy food or anything else beneficial, and we were told that the money was typically used to pay for glue, which they then sniffed. It was clear from their faces that many were not living in the same universe, and one can only suppose that their drug-induced state allows them to put the reality of their existence aside, even if only temporarily. We were especially concerned that there was one young girl (we were told she was 15) amongst an otherwise all-male population. However, we were assured by our guide that she was always treated as a sister by the others. In fact, they tend to care for each other. This was then powerfully affirmed when one teenage boy brought the plight of one 9 year old, named Malik, to the attention of the group. When Mary, the deputy head of Cheryl's asked some questions, she was told that he had been hit by a lorry and had damaged his stomach. Some of the group (I was not amongst them) inspected his injuries, and discovered to their horror that part of his intestines were protruding on his stomach. The fact that he was not screaming in agony astounded me for one, and it was agreed that he should be taken to a hospital for treatment. It was astounding how this small boy put all his trust in complete strangers, and was perfectly happy to be removed from the surroundings. After some scant formalities on our way back to the vehicles, we drove him away, cradled in Claire's arms. His clothing had one large damp patch on it, and a swarm of flies followed him wherever he went, as well as an overpowering odour. We then visited a child rehabilitation centre nearby before driving into yet another rubbish dump. We had been warned by our driver that this place gave off a 'sharp' smell. I was raised on a farm, and am used to the aroma of nature, but even I found it hard to stifle the involuntary gagging which this onslaught brought on. It was truly to most disgusting stench imaginable, and yet again, on top of absolute mountains of rubbish, one could again make out the silhouettes of scavenging youngsters. We then drove to a hospital and left Malik with James, Claire, and the orphanage manager, Rose, waiting for an appointment with an Accident and Emergency consultant. He was seen later that afternoon, and it was agreed that he would return for a consultation the next Tuesday, after it had been revealed that the cause of the abdominal rupture was surgery performed recently to relieve pressure on his spinal column. What the surgeons had performed was in fact a colostomy – unfortunately they had only provided a very small supply of colostomy bags with which he could dispose of the output – hence the smell and the attraction to flies. Naturally, he would not have had access to any further medical supplies had he remained where he was, and one can only wonder how long it would have been before disease, most likely fatal, had set in. Somehow the wound had opened – we are not sure that there was ever a traffic accident. The reason he was found at the dump was that his parents considered him too much of a liability once he was operated on, and threw him out. There is a happy ending to his story. Firstly he tested clear of HIV the following Monday (one of the few conditions for acceptance at Cheryl's), and he is now being sponsored by Claire who devoted much of her time to his welfare during her trip; further the corrective surgery is likely to be paid for collectively by the 2011 team. As the days passed, it was also stunning to watch the way in which the other children watched out for his welfare, and someone was usually close by him making sure he was OK. We also noticed after a couple of days that Malik himself took on oversight duties for some of the very small toddlers. Such is the camaraderie amongst the children, presumably borne out of a comprehension of each other's struggles in life before they made it to the haven of the orphanage.

Which leads me to my soap box moment. We hear a great deal these days about the delinquency of youth in society. If anyone can find more decent and wholesome examples of what youth really can be than Grace, Cian, and Claire, I should be very interested to see them. They gave up their relatively comfortable home lives for the rigours and the emotional shocks of the Kenyan unfortunates, and threw themselves in with such gusto and devotion that it was sometimes difficult to observe without considerable emotional overflow. All three attracted the very young to them instantly, and it was unusual not to see them in any free time either carrying a baby (for Grace particularly it was a child called Handerson, whom she now sponsors), or leading a bunch of toddlers who seemed to be attached like limpets, and who were extremely reluctant to let go. All three of them are an absolute credit to their generation, and the world can look forward to a future of far greater compassion with people like them to lead the way. I was thoroughly proud and highly impressed by their behaviour throughout. They are normal, fun-loving youngsters, who are not do-gooders in the usual oppressive sense of the word, but whose contribution to this trip was one of the revelations of the visit for me. It was a great privilege to be

associated with them all.

Thursday was a day for Maeve and James to finalise the sometimes fraught arrangements for the short visit to Ireland by their sponsor children, Kevin and Joseph respectively, along with chaperone Mary. I shall leave others to explain what happened, but more than one whole day was expended arguing and going over old ground to secure the necessary visas. In fact, on the following Monday, new tickets had to be purchased to by-pass London completely. Maeve may wish to explain more of those escapades, perhaps when the visitors return to Kenya in a little more than a week's time. While they were away, I found myself sitting in with the choir children who had been rehearsing alone rather than under the tuition of James and Maeve each day. It made quite a change from trying to give career choice advice, which had been my `teaching' task aimed at 13 to 15 year olds. I'm pleased to report that Cheryl's has instilled considerable ambition into these children – there were several wanting to be pilots, two neuro surgeons, a number of doctors, an aeronautical engineer, and some lawyers. On a lighter note, one young man (actually Collins, whom my wife and I sponsor) indicated that his second choice was a professional wrestler, a testament to the power of junk TV!

Saturday was the day of the dreaded leaving ceremony! It's an emotional time for both the visitors and the residents, and this year was just like all the others. Samuel made his customary stirring speech, gifts were given (always by the child with whom the visitor has made a very special bond – in my case a small boy called Walter who had arrived about one week prior to my initial visit in 2009, and who seemed to seek me out at every opportunity, despite his abject shyness.) Happily, Greg deflated the tension after the ceremony by engaging everyone in a sort of US Marine inspired call and respond marching shout. From memory it went like this:

Everywhere we go (followed by the same response after each line)

People always ask us

Who we are

And where do we come from

And we tell them

We're from Kenya

And if they don't hear us

We shout a little louder

.....each verse going up a tone in pitch and up a number of decibels. The group of children who had entertained us at the ceremony sang the responses. The younger ones were literally falling over with laughter as the song progressed. Greg then sang a rendition of `Singin' in the rain' which involved strange body contortions as it progressed. Mary, who is a fairly substantial lady, joined in with great enthusiasm, and when the less elegant poses were struck, some of the children became literally hysterical with laughter. Greg was VERY good value that night, not only in entertaining everyone, but also in lifting spirits so dampened by the sadness of goodbyes. (Incidentally, his 2 year old daughter, after seeing him off from home, had apparently told everyone that daddy had gone to Kenya on a double decker bus).

Sunday those of us who remained visited a baby elephant orphanage for its one hour of opening. We saw two groups of the youngsters, and we watched them being caressed by, and reciprocating the affection with their trunks, their keepers, who explained how they came to be there. Some (not too many, thankfully) had lost parents to poachers. The majority (or so it seemed to me) had fallen into ditches where water pipes had been laid, and had been rescued by returning workers when their parents had had to leave them to their fate when they could not reach them. To say they were adorable is something of a vast understatement. At one stage, just before they left, one lay on the ground, another lay on top, and yet another on top of that. Then another infant came up and started trying to dislodge to top one by pushing with all his might. Anyone who remembers children's rough and tumbles would have seen the similarities in an instant. A beautiful interlude. And that evening, a group of us went to a restaurant to celebrate in advance a significant birthday coming up in October – I daren't say any more for fear of retribution from the birthday celebrant.

Monday was another frustrating plane ticket/visa day for Maeve and James, while the rest of us finished off the painting detail.

Tuesday was unforgettable. A bone-shaker of a bus was hired, and 44 children and 9 adults (including the driver) set off for Lake Nakuru nature reserve, which lies around 150 kilometres to the north-west of Nairobi. Once there (after far too many roadside police inspections) the day was magical. The children sat in awe as we passed numerous gazelles, three white rhinos, jackals, buffalo, zebras, wart hogs, baboons, monkeys, and swarm upon swarm of pelicans and flamingos. And my famous caribou storks (yes, of course, I mean marabou, but the word just wouldn't come out correctly). We ended up with a meal of burger and chips (fries for those in the US), and then trekked back to Nairobi. I took a picture of the children making a letter T with their hands in the hope that the Australian TV network Channel 9's Today morning show will show it next week. I think this will be the first Kenyan contribution to a daily occurrence, usually involving sporting events.

I have a significant portfolio of evocative pictures, some of which I hope to make available to the fan club in the near future as long as the ladies of officialdom will allow me to. The ones of which I am proudest are the ones involving the children at Cheryl's, and in Kibera, which to me eyes convey the beauty and depth of these wonderful children, who had been dealt a woefully inadequate life before they were taken into the orphanage.

There is one very special person who deserves so much recognition for what he has done, and about whom little is said. Basil Love started his charity because he could not bear to stand by after seeing the deprecation these innocent souls had to endure. His devotion to improving the lot of the children is something which continues to move me beyond words; he would probably not thank me for saying such things (it's the short man syndrome probably – Basil is one of the few people who are not taller than me), but he truly is a hero of the first order. Others (the other employees there who work tirelessly for precious little, James and Maeve who laboured over various facets of the CD and who canvass for sponsors continuously, and the teams of principally Irish annual volunteers) play enormous roles, but none of it would be nearly as constructive without Basil's vision, organisation and industry. In his closing address (and his powers of oratory always manage to wring the emotions dry - literally), Samuel explained how the entire orphanage had, at some time or other, been almost totally shunned by much of the local population. He told us all how much our efforts and friendship meant to everyone there. He also said something which I shall never forget because of the challenge it held up. His words were (and I hope I convey this correctly) that our very presence gives the children so much, both in terms of joy and hope. My own take on this was that he could not be more wrong. It is the welcome and the delight in the children's faces and demeanour when they are around us which is the greatest gift any of the team could have taken away. I know that there are adults and children there who are like family to me now. I kept hearing from one official there how she would thank her God for sending us – little could she have realised how immensely her selfless dedication made me grateful beyond measure that there are people like her who devote their lives to the defenceless children. A visitor to Cheryl's takes away infinitely more than they can ever contribute.