

A week in the life of.....

I am staying in Kampala with Jane, CEO of Homes of Promise, and spending a couple of weeks with her and the boys and staff. It's my fourth visit, although the others were all pre COVID and at the old house at Gabba. This is a brief reflection on what has been going on and my observations.

I arrived on the Thursday morning having flown overnight and went straight to the new George's Place at Garuga. George's Place was bursting and bustling with boys as they were mostly still there. I was greeted enthusiastically as Uncle Martin by some very large, tall boys who had grown enormously in the last four years. They were desperate to know about Professor Mike, my son who came in 2019. Mike has significant learning disabilities, no Luganda and limited English conversation, however he established a warm bond with several boys at the time and it was really affirming to see him remembered.

The HOP office is now a small secure room with proper internet etc., in a church/charity conference centre in central Kampala. It's much more efficient than when it was in the garage at the old house in Gabba. No boys rushing in for a hug after school or to complain about lost gym kit etc, and calm space to do all the back office stuff that a large professional place has to keep up with. Just observing the amount of work that goes on there shows the complexity of dealing with forty boys, each of whom carries a lot of emotional bruises and needs bespoke care and attention.

Saturday saw me off to accompany Jesse (driver) and Tressor with Cassita to Mukono to take Cassita to the secondary school where he boards. Traffic was appalling and it took about four hours each way to do a ninety-minute journey. The school looked really smart and inviting. It was a real joy to see how Cassita was greeted by some of the staff and how keen he was to be back. Fees are very low by UK Standards but still out of reach of most Ugandans.

On an odd note, boys are required to arrive at school at the start of each term with reams of branded white paper, brooms, floor mops, gallons of detergent and disinfectant, two dozen toilet rolls and other stuff all by the use of the school. Goodness knows where it goes. It's enough to block the drains permanently and bleach the floors white. We also called in to the Connect Africa vocational school where Victor and Saviour had started early in the week on a catering course. They claimed it was boring but I rather suspected that work was about to ramp up in a big way, and some shocks would follow.

Much of this week has been take up with visiting the homes of two of the older boys who have completed vocational training and work experience. The plan is for them to take up work in their village or with a family relative. The purpose of the visits is to make sure that the boys are fully connected with their families and that boys and family understand their responsibilities to each other. It's an important part of moving them from largely being supported and dependent on George's Place and Homes of Promise to being fully independent young men. Experience shows this is an uneven process with the potential for a few hiccups along the way.

Most of the other older boys have gone back to trade and vocational school, particularly the Don Bosco college which I visited four years ago. This provides both practical and theory-based training in skills such as plumbing, welding, auto mechanics and catering.

The younger ones living full time at George's Place are still in day schools and also restarted in the week. It was suddenly quiet when we called in mid-day on Friday.

Some reflections on the week. There is still a great need for assistance of the type that HOP provides, and that as government initiatives to remove young people from the streets increase that need will continue to expand. At the moment HOP receives no funding from the Ugandan national or local government, although the authorities remain keen to send new boys along. Operating in Uganda remains difficult. There is increasing involvement from local officials who bring little to the work except their job titles yet expect to receive compensation and thanks for doing what, in the UK, we would expect as a normal part of their duties. Although in theory inflation rates for Uganda are similar to the UK, local prices do not seem to reflect this, and in particular school fees almost doubled since COVID 19. There have been a lot of staff changes over the last four years and the current team seem a well-integrated and enthusiastic bunch. It's a bit unfair to name anyone as each of them has strengths and talents, but the unseen hero is Petra, Finance Officer who ploughs through masses of detail matching up receipts and making payments, checking everything is correct and present, always cheerful and with an eye on what needs to be done next to keep things running smoothly.

So, thanks to Jane and all the staff and the boys. Its always a joy to see you.

Martin