



Newsletter 2020

A Challenging Year At The ALDS

The arrival of Covid19 to Ethiopia in mid-March led to the sudden closure of schools in Ethiopia. As a consequence the children returned home to their families in the countryside. However, the great news is that the school will reopen in at the beginning of October.

The school year started off very positively with the enrolment of 22 new students. This increase effectively trebled the number of children at the school in just two years, was a direct result of our 'Outreach Team' visiting rural districts and informing parents of Deaf children about the school and the potential it offered for their child.



Mr. Eshetu, principal of ALDS addressing parents of Deaf children at Babiche Town.



Making Friends: Isergu (R) welcomes Tsyon (L) to the school.

The energy and enthusiasm that the new children brought to the school was wonderful. The warm welcome they received from both the teachers and older students helped them to settle in very quickly and they soon began making new friends. They were very enthusiastic to learn as many new Signs as possible. However, It was not until they got their new uniforms that they seemed to feel they were fully part of the school.



Row of shops on the road up to the ALDS.

Unfortunately, despite such a positive beginning to the year, there was a great deal of social and political unrest throughout Ethiopia. This often resulted in violent protests and significant disruptions to businesses and schools.

During the year we received the wonderful news the **Starkey Foundation** had chosen the ALDS to benefit from their hearing aid program. We spent weeks preparing the children for a journey to Addis Ababa, explaining what a hearing aid is, what is involved in audiology tests etc. The opportunity to get on a bus and travel to Addis Ababa was excitement enough for some of them. Prior to travelling all of their parents visited the school to learn about the potential benefits of a hearing aids and to grant permission for their child to travel.



We were due to travel on Sat the 14th of March, however, on the afternoon of **'Friday the 13th'** news came through that the first case of Corona Virus had been detected in the Addis Ababa. The Government moved very quickly and banned all gatherings of people over 100. And so to our great distress, the hearing aid program had to be cancelled.

With 100 deaf children and parents gathered at the school it was heart-breaking having to inform everyone about the cancellation. However, it provided us with a great opportunity to begin teaching the children about Covid19. How to protect themselves and how to help prevent it spreading. On the 17th March, the Government announced it was shutting all schools.



Dararaa watches as Ingidawerq (L) and Laslaa (R) model the new way of greeting.



At the beginning of April it was decided that it would be safest for the children to return home to their families in the countryside.

The awful effects of COVID19 have of course been felt universally and for many people the consequences have been tragic. At the ALDS, it was the younger students we felt most disappointed for, they had just begun their journey in education, were making progress with Ethiopian Sign Language had made new friends, got their new uniforms (always a huge moment for each of the children) and suddenly all of this learning and socialising was disrupted. Hopefully we can make up all that lost ground when they return.



Danbale and her mother learning the Ethiopian Sign Alphabet for the first time.



Meseret, Wandamagen & Fayessa collect their worksheets

During the school closure, the teachers continued to reach-out and support students who were living in the local district, especially those in Grades 4 & 5. They provided them with lots of photocopied worksheets and encouraged them to continue their studies from home. This was greatly appreciated by parents, some of whom mentioned that it provided them with an opportunity to engage in their child’s learning.



The majority of people in Ambo, including the parents of some of the Deaf children, are daily labourers and receive a small income in order to provide for their families. They have no savings or stores of food. During lockdown there was no work, no income and very little food

So when the lockdown was lifted we gathered together the families of the Deaf children living in Ambo and thanks to the sponsorship funds we were able to provide them with food parcels and some items to help with hygiene. The EDP organised a Facebook appeal and together with **VLM & St. Vincent’s College Castleknock (Steps2Ambo)** raised enough funds to support over 250 families with basic food supplies.

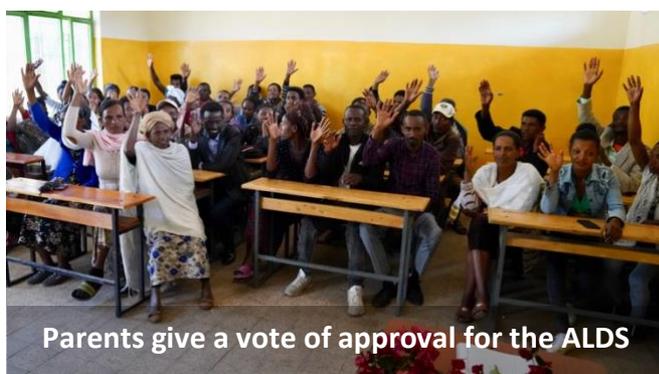


Distributing essential food supplies post lockdown

If we were to highlight one very positive aspect from the year, it would be our engagement with the parents of children. At a number of meetings they shared their experience of the school and the difference they see it making to their children and indeed themselves and their families.



Chaltu and her proud Dad



The majority of parents agree that they had been strongly influenced by false and negative beliefs which are widely perpetuated about people with disabilities. They had never received any positive encouragement about their child. So they were somewhat sceptical about the school and its ability to be able to educate their child.

Having travelled 4 hours to get to the school, one father said he was overwhelmed by the warm and friendly welcome he received. He had an instant feeling that his son was valued and appreciated. Another parent said she was worried that her daughter would have to pass an exam and was so relieved when all she had to do was fill in a registration form and answer some basic questions. The only qualifications her 20 year old daughter, needed was to be Deaf and a desire to be enrolled at the school.

All of the parents agreed on the transformation they have seen take place in the disposition of their child. These little testimonials can often be very emotional occasions for all of us who participate. Many parents live with a terrible sense of guilt about how they have treated their Deaf child and say they have undergone a complete change in mindset about how they now perceive children with disabilities.



Of course the staff at the school realise the capacity of the students to learn, but, when they hear the parents speak so openly and in a way that affirms what they are doing, they can't help but take a great sense of pride and satisfaction in their work.

When you are constantly battling against negative stereotypes any little bit of progress or success is something to be celebrated and built on.



Parents & Children gather to learn about the Sign Language Program

In February we introduced Ethiopian Sign Language classes for the parents and siblings of the children. We had the biggest response we have ever had to such an invitation and were excited about the prospect of so many family members being able to communicate with their child or brother or sister. Unfortunately this program also fell victim to the Covid. We hope to have it up and running again, as soon as the school opens

The one industry that continued to operate during the lockdown was construction. Plans to build a new integrated classroom at St. Justin's Kindergarten School (opposite the Deaf School) had just been finalised before Covid broke out. The building is almost complete. During the three months of construction it has provided daily employment for up to 27 local people. This project has been partly funded by the EDP. A young woman who was employed as a cleaner at the Deaf school and who has a certificate in Ethiopian Sign Language was supported by a kind benefactor to attend Montessori College and will soon be employed as a teacher at the new classroom.



Construction of the integrated Classroom at St. Justin's KG School.

I suppose the whole world has been adapting and readjusting due to the pandemic. Nothing in Ambo is ever predictable, often there is no electricity or water or phone network etc. We regularly have to alter plans at the last minute. Patience is not a virtue it's a necessity. The school has been busy contacting all the families and the Departments of Social Affairs in the various districts to ensure the children are registered for the new school year. We hope it will be a more stable year and one that will be very rewarding for all the students and staff.

Thanks to the boys and staff at St. Vincent's Castleknock College, the Principal Mr. Kinder, the Parents Association and Castleknock College Union for your ongoing support for the Deaf school.



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