



Young children with teddies made by Porlock Women's Fellowship



Members of Minehead &amp; District Lions



Minehead's male voice choir - constant supporters of the project

# The dream that transformed an island in the sun

By TONY JAMES

THE generosity of West Somerset residents and organisations has transformed the lives of several hundred school children on the remote Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar.

It's the completion of a 15-year project resulting in a modern school and a thriving enterprise centre dreamed up by a Porlock couple who visited the island on holiday.

"I have just been sent a report on how much progress has been," said Stephen Fitzgerald who with his wife Chris masterminded the plan until 2020 and are still closely involved with the project.

"I was so pleased to pass on the news to all the people in West Somerset who have worked hard and raised a total of over \$60,000 to turn our scheme into reality.

"It has transformed the lives of the children and the project now has a yearly income of 2,800 US dollars a year, which makes it self-supporting and put the school on its feet.

Although the West Somerset aid programme ended in 2020, Stephen and Chris still take a close interest in the project. They have visited island in the past to see how the work was progressing and to meet government officials.

Stephen and Chris were on a cruise in 2005 when they went ashore near the K/Dimbani school in Zanzibar. "I call it the brief encounter which changed our lives," Stephen said.

"We were only there for an hour or two and went into a little café where there was a collecting box for the school rebuilding fund. The head teacher, Haji R'dan, happened to come in when we were putting money in the box and invited us to see what they were doing.

"The school was only half built and the head teacher said that as they had very little money the job would take a long time. The government could afford wages for the workers but nothing else. Employment prospects in Zanzibar are difficult and consist mainly of subsistence farming and fishing. Tourism is one area which

Invaluable shop units



offers growth prospects.

"We were really impressed with what they were trying to do at the school and said that when we returned to England we would start fund-raising and would come up with a five-year plan. We didn't imagine we would still be fund-raising 15 years later!

Back in West Somerset fund-raising for what became known as the "Concordia Project" - Stephen's old school motto which means "working together" - soon exceeded all expectations.

Over the years, Minehead male voice choir stumped up over \$6,000, regular donations from patrons and supporters totalled over \$45,000, a total of 20 collection tins brought in over \$4,000. Minehead and district Lions Club provided a well and sets of toilets for shops and backpacking rooms, and Porlock Women's Fellowship also provided a total of 47 teddy-bears for small children.

When work started, the initial phase included the building of a pair of three bed-roomed bungalows, furnished, electrified and plumbed and used by visiting teachers and Peace Corp volunteers.

There were major repairs needed to leaking roofs, building a safety wall around the school, work on two other associated local schools - including classrooms and an admin block - additional buildings and toilets.

This was followed by the building of an enterprise centre comprising two units to be used by visiting backpackers, with washbasins and showers, electricity and furnishings and advertised through AirB&B.

There were also three shop units, provision of internet access, a laptop, camera, solar panels and school equipment.

The Dar Es Salaam Lions Club also provided a three-day health camp during which 651 villagers received free health treatment.

Stephen added that the project is now self-supporting, with shop rentals bringing in \$1008 a year, and the backpacking rooms adding a further \$1800 per annum - a total \$2808 per annum which is used directly for the school.

In addition, three of the units are run as a restaurant and the fourth sells goods, including gas cylinders, to the villagers which saves them from a long expensive journey to the nearest town.

"It is really great that things are going so well and that young people in particular are benefitting from what we were able to do," Stephen said.

"Although we are not directly involved any more, the project is still close to our hearts. I don't expect anything to go wrong in the future but, if it did, I know we wouldn't hesitate to help out."



Above: Stephen and Chris with members of Dar Es Salaam Lions



Left: Minehead & District Lions provided a well and other facilities



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