

# “God’s Special Children”

## A Story of Four Schools



## Introduction

This booklet tells the stories of four schools: two in Zambia and two in deprived areas of India. Although very different from each other, the same impulse brought them into existence. Parents, wherever they come from, want the best for their children and know that the surest way to achieve it is through getting them the education that they themselves never had. Charitable organisations are sometimes accused of devising top-down projects which have little or no impact in the long term and we have made every effort to guard against this. In each of the four stories, we hope you can see that we have built upon what parents, grandparents and local communities want most for their boys and girls. Talking of boys and girls, we have been at pains to ensure that we do all we can to remove the hindrances which may prevent girls from fully participating. And in faithfulness to the origins of our charity we have been especially careful to include those who are doubly disadvantaged through disability as well as poverty.

So, we believe that each of these places, Muumba, Nanga, Asha Kiran Ashram and Happy Valley, will be legacy projects not short-term initiatives. We are telling the stories of their past and present, but they have a long term future and will continue to enhance the lives of the children and communities they serve.

## Muumba School

The community at Muumba felt isolated and largely forgotten. Life for them was hard and they survived by subsistence farming. There was little or no spare cash and certainly no money for transporting their children to the nearest primary school.

Despite all of these difficulties, they did what they could. They constructed a simple building making bricks from local mud and scratching enough money together to roof it with corrugated sheets. There were no windows in this makeshift school and no furniture. The children sat on the floor while a volunteer teacher used a homemade blackboard to conduct basic lessons.

HHI joined the story in 2009 when representatives of the local community asked us if we could help do something more for their children, including those who were orphaned and vulnerable.

Over several years we provided help with basic equipment, but the little school became increasingly inadequate to meet the needs of the growing numbers of children who wanted to attend.



*Where it all began. Children outside the original school*

The only answer was to build a new school. Easy to think about, but very hard to bring about. There were feasibility studies and long conversations with the Zambian Board of Education before we could go ahead. Fundraising activities followed and a grant from the Waterloo Foundation provided further help. Finally, in 2015, the big day came, and the new building was opened. It had a sturdy block with two bright, airy classrooms, an office and storage space. The community was justly proud of their new school. We had provided the materials but many of them had laboured to erect it. The Zambian government agreed to fund qualified teaching staff, a headteacher was appointed and Muumba primary school was in business.

It began to grow quickly. A boundary wall was erected to secure the small campus, and ramps for disabled access were built where needed. In 2017 HHI provided the funds to sink a borehole which provided the school with a reliable source of clean water and made possible the cultivation of a productive school garden.



*The new school*

The Zambian Government recognized what the school was achieving by making it an official examination centre. It had come a long way in two years. Here in the UK our supporters enjoyed helping. Church groups knitted grey school sweaters, and one church group from Merthyr provided outdoor equipment for the youngest children. Other supporters filled and sent pencil cases, and a local comprehensive school - Lliswerry High School - used their Harvest fundraising event to send extra funds.



*Water pump and 'Cabbages Galore'*

But schools need more than classrooms, books and teachers, they also need toilets. The school had grown rapidly, and the pit latrines were no longer fit for purpose. Separate facilities for girls were especially important – without them girls just wouldn't attend school. So, in 2020 a new sanitary block was built with running water and separate facilities for boys and girls. It housed special handwashing stations – especially important in the light of the pandemic.



*The new sanitary block*

The growing school has had to recruit more staff, and the headteacher, Mr Bbilika, now leads a team of nine teachers. One member of staff, Prisca Hatembo, received her first wheelchair from the HHI container, and this enabled her to complete her own schooling. When she wanted to become a teacher herself, she received three years' teacher training funded by HHI. Prisca now supports her family – it's an inspiring story.



*Prisca with her colleagues*

The school has gone through tough times. In 2019 the community was struck down by a terrible drought and the harvests failed. So the school became a feeding centre with local parents helping to prepare the meals that HHI funded. And despite it all the children presented themselves for end of year examinations and did really well.



*'Muumba Mums' and 'Happy Diners'*

So what would you see if you visited Muumba school today? The original cohort of forty children has grown to 330 pupils; half of them are girls, a few are disabled, some are orphans and all are vulnerable to the hardships of life in the regional economy. You would see that they are serious about their education - they know it is an investment in their future.

The next chapter of the story is still to be written. The school wants to expand further to educate children of secondary school age. This will mean the construction of another classroom block, with three classrooms - an expensive undertaking. The Zambian Board of Education favours all-through schools and will help with staffing costs, but are unable to fund buildings and equipment. It's a very big challenge but this small community is preparing to take it on. HHI is seeking to help and looking for ways to help raise the funding which is needed.

### **Nanga Special School**

Nanga Special School has 25 - 30 disabled children who are all boarders. HHI first made a visit in 2015 and saw first-hand the disadvantages it was labouring under. There were two ill-equipped classrooms and two shabby dormitories. The staff were committed to the children and even maintained a large vegetable plot to supplement their diet but there was no accommodation for them and facilities were rudimentary.



*The pit latrine*

What shocked us most was the nature of the sanitary facilities. Both boys and girls, many of them with mobility problems, had to use the same pit latrine with its narrow entrance and dark corridor. There were no handwashing facilities.

HHI believed that it was important to see to basic needs first and so we funded the building of separate male and female flush toilets with ramps to make them accessible to wheelchair users.



*The new toilet block*

Supporting a school like Nanga is our core business and we formed an ongoing relationship with the headteacher and the local community. As well as improving the sanitary facilities we helped them to redecorate the dormitories. HHI containers, sent from the UK, also provided toothbrushes, new mattresses for the dormitories, and stationery for the classrooms.



*The spruced-up dormitory*

The school began to grow as facilities improved and another basic need became pressing. There was no kitchen or dining room.

The school cook used a makeshift corrugated iron shelter as her kitchen. She collected the firewood she needed from the local area – not an easy task during the rainy season - and served nshima to the children sitting outside their classrooms.



*The school kitchen!*

So, in 2019, HHI funded the building of a separate dining room in which food could be stored and prepared and where the students could eat their meals in safety and comfort. The large space would also double up outside meal times as a place for extra study and recreation.

We are also installing solar panels to provide energy for computers, a television and lighting. This means that the space can be used during the long evenings. We hope to complete this work soon with help from a charitable trust, but the Covid pandemic has delayed everything.





*The new dining hall*

Despite the pandemic, 2021 saw further developments at Nanga. HHI funded the construction of an additional water tank so that the vegetable garden could be extended. This enabled the school to follow a national programme called 'Activity for Living' which greatly benefited the children.



*Working in the vegetable garden*

Ramps were put in place so that all the buildings became more accessible. Paths were improved - walking between blocks through long grass increases the risk of snakebite!



*New paths at Nanga*

What's next for Nanga? The children will continue to be our first priority but recently we found out that the head teacher, Mr Bweupe, is sleeping in the corner of a classroom partitioned off with pieces of cardboard. Although the school has official recognition from the Zambian Board of Education, it has provided nowhere for the headteacher to stay, even though school staff are usually given accommodation at boarding schools. A special school asks a great deal of its leadership team, and HHI believed it is right to improve accommodation for the headteacher and his deputy. We have drawn up plans and obtained estimates. With labour costs and materials, the bill will be in excess of £16,000 – a lot for a small charity like ours to find – but we are committed to the task and to the future of this school. The story of Nanga is far from finished.

## **Asha Kiran Ashram**

Santhosh Kumar, a pastor working in Tamil Nadu, had a disabled son. A brain tumour had left him severely disabled. He became aware that many other parents in his area were also caring for disabled children – often without the resources that he had. He discovered that there were over a thousand disabled children in the local area. Often they were triply disadvantaged. Not only were they suffering from a range of disabilities but they often lived in extreme poverty and some aspects of the local culture saw disability as a punishment for past wrongdoing. Disabled children were, as a result, a source of shame.

He developed a vision for a dedicated special needs school and in 2009 approached HHI to see if we could help. His vision was for a centre that would cater for the needs of about 30 of these youngsters, providing transport, special needs teaching and training, physiotherapy and a nutritious mid-day meal, all in a caring Christian environment. About 15 of these would be in residential care, and the remainder would be brought in daily. He asked HHI to fund a suitable building and running costs, with the expectation that he would gradually raise an increasing proportion of the daily expenses.

We quickly agreed and set about raising the necessary funding. Newport Scouts and Strathaven Scouts pitched in and did a wonderful job of raising both the capital and initial running costs. Building proceeded apace and Asha Kiran Ashram (Rays of Hope Home) opened its doors in late 2009, initially providing rays of hope to 15 day children. The school quickly developed and soon took in children who needed residential care.



*The new school*

Santhosh persisted with his vision and continued to raise funds for the growing school. Pupils began to thrive - not only benefiting from basic skills education but from physiotherapy and nutritious meals. There are now almost fifty pupils with a wide range of mental or physical disabilities.



The Tamil Nadu state government inspected the school, was impressed by what it has achieved, and formally recognised it, which entitled it to a grant that covers a proportion of the running costs.

*Uma (cerebral palsy) – the delight in having solved the shape sorter is clear for all to see.*

With continued support from HHI the school building has improved. In 2011/12 a residential block comprising two dormitories, bathrooms and a veranda was added to the small campus and the original building was re-roofed to replace the original asbestos sheets.

The school has also continued to develop its expertise in helping its pupils to make progress. The importance of early intervention has been realised and when children are given the right therapy early on their progress can be remarkable. Physiotherapy has been especially effective along with the provision of appropriate mobility aids. In some cases, results have been dramatic with children enabled to enter employment or mainstream education. For hard pressed carers, children who can do even a bit more for themselves, or who are just a bit happier, is a great boon. And even for those children where little improvement can be made in relation to their disability, the compassionate and skilful day care greatly improves quality of life and provides welcome respite for carers

Parents from the local community have been amazed at what their disabled children can learn to do, given the right stimulating environment and specialist care.

As a result not only have children's lives been transformed but villagers' attitudes to disability have also been changed. Such children are no longer automatically seen as a cause for shame, or as a punishment for sins committed. Instead, many now refer to them as "God's special children".

The pandemic has unfortunately hit the school very hard. There is a high incidence of Covid-19 in the community and for the time being children can no longer attend. The teachers are doing what they can using remote learning and house calls where these are possible.



*Beulah happily running around on her prosthetic legs*

The physiotherapist has been able to advise parents remotely and teach them exercises to do with their children, as well as making some house calls.

Despite the pandemic the planning for development goes on. Recognising the huge role played by physiotherapy in improving the lot of many of its children, the next initiative is to build a hall where a greater range of therapies can take place and equipment can be stored safely.

Currently dormitories or the veranda are used and equipment is stored wherever space can be found. Thanks to the generosity of supporters, The Ashworth Charitable Trust and The Blackwood Trust, we now have funding in place to build this much needed hall once Covid-19 has retreated. The vision is to extend the provision of physiotherapy to local villagers. At the moment, they are too poor to pay for it themselves, or are unable to travel to where it is available.

Santhosh is still full of ambition. He knows that the school could double in size and still be full. He is looking to build further classrooms and to improve security by the installation of CCTV. HHI loves his enthusiasm for the work. He has achieved a great deal, is unfailingly enthusiastic, and sometimes we have to say to him, 'One thing at a time, Santhosh!' Nevertheless, working in partnership with someone from the community has been a key factor in the success of Ashra Kiran Ashram. The future of the school is assured because it meets the needs of the people it serves.

## Happy Valley

One good idea leads to another, and Philip Mathew, one of our partners in India, saw the potential for a school like AKA in Nedumangad, in southern Kerala. We already had a building there which we were using to offer counselling but it was unused for much of the week.

We had learned how effective physiotherapy could be for children with disabilities and we started by using the space to treat local children. A physiotherapist was employed for three days a week. She not only treated the children but instructed the parents on programmes they could follow with them. As at AKA the programme proved to be a great success and so demand began to grow. Soon the centre began to offer speech therapy and acupressure - a highly regarded traditional Indian therapy.



*Umbrella making not only teaches life skills but also improves dexterity*

The building quickly proved inadequate for the growing number of clients, and Philip, with our friend Tom Sutherland, took out a lease on a building in Kalathara. It was larger and had a good outside space. There was a kitchen, living accommodation, and classrooms. Happy Valley Special Needs School was born.



*Speech therapy in progress*

There are now between 40 and 50 children who come most days, brought in by the centre's two vehicles. As at Asha Kiran, they receive small group teaching and training appropriate to their abilities. For the younger ones this may be the basics of reading, writing, numeracy and English; for others it may be speech therapy. Physiotherapy helps children to build up muscle mass and develop flexibility, both of which improve mobility, and is provided both to the children of Happy Valley and also to a number of outpatients who could not otherwise afford it. For older children, vocational training in useful and marketable skills is provided, with umbrella making, candle making, kitchen skills and gardening being taught – skills that can help them make a living. The umbrellas and candles made by the trainees are sold and make a welcome contribution to the school's finances.

The success of the school can be seen in the lives of the children. Many are a lot more mobile than when they arrived. Some have been able to enter, or re-enter, mainstream education. And others have been equipped to survive in the harsh world when they leave. All have received care and attention in a loving Christian environment.

The Covid pandemic has hit Kerala particularly hard and, as with Asha Kiran, the lockdown means that children are currently unable to come to the school. Philip has pioneered the use of mobile phones, which are ubiquitous in India, to provide remote learning, coupled with home visits. It is not an ideal situation, as the children miss out on the interaction with their peers and their parents miss out on respite care. Everyone is looking forward to the time when the school's doors can reopen.



*Kessiya has been enabled to enter mainstream education because of the help that she received at Happy Valley*

The future of Happy Valley is less secure than the other schools in this booklet. The lease on the present building is soon to expire and the school has to relocate. Ideally it needs its own building. Once in place the government will step in and help with teachers' salaries but it cannot help with capital costs. And the costs are huge by Indian standards and not small by ours. In this part of India, land prices are steep and rising so raising the money will be a huge challenge. The present estimate suggests that the final bill will be in excess of £100,000.

The demand for services for disabled children in this part of India is huge and Philip feels he could cater for at least a hundred children in a new school. At present, we are limited by finance, not by his energy and vision. Philip and HHI (UK) will search for ways to raise the money that this community needs to enhance the life chances of their most vulnerable children.

### **Conclusion and Acknowledgements**

We hope you have enjoyed and, perhaps been inspired by, the stories of these four schools. Each, in different ways, are testimonies to the way that, given a chance, children from even the poorest communities have the potential to improve their lives. They also show the importance of working in partnership with local communities and making their priorities our own.

All will continue to face challenges that are much more testing than those we encounter in the UK, but year on year their resilience is growing. We have every confidence that their stories are not complete and that they will continue to help 'God's special children' for generations to come.

HHI could do nothing without its band of loyal supporters and we beg for your indulgence if we fail to mention anyone below. We are grateful to everyone mentioned or not. So, thank you to:

- ◇ All the individuals who support us and who provide the bulk of our funding. You will forgive us if we don't name you – there are thousands of you – and without you the work could not go on.
- ◇ The churches and chapels of South Wales and beyond who have supported us in so many ways from the early days of the charity - both with prayers and with practical help.
- ◇ Community organisations, including Newport and Strathaven Scouts.
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  - ◇ The Ashworth Charitable Trust
  - ◇ The Blackwood Trust (Blackwood Engineering)
  - ◇ The Waterloo Foundation

Finally, we say thank you to the Zambian Board of Education and to the Tamil Nadu State Government who have become long term partners in developing these schools.

If you would like to help any of these schools as they continue their vital work, then please contact HHI.



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