

Surrendering Bethany

Sister Mary Paule was responsible for establishing an exceptional home for abandoned babies in Mthatha, South Africa. After 33 years she recently retired. Joanne Lentfer pays tribute.

August is Women's month in South Africa. National Women's Day is celebrated on 9 August with a public holiday. On the birth of this day 47 years ago, 20,000 women from all over the country marched in Pretoria to protest the extension of government regulations to African women concerning the carrying of passes. Despite the protests the law was passed and further extended in 1960 to put a total ban on all rural women coming to urban areas.

It feels appropriate to write this article in August about one very extraordinary woman who has made an enormous difference to the lives of many, many people – especially the children of Bethany Home in Mthatha, South Africa.

Sister Mary Paule is the founder of Bethany Home at Ikhwezi Lokusa. An American by birth, Sister has lived in South Africa since 1952, most of which has been spent in Mthatha. Sister was 'posted' to Ikhwezi Lokusa in 1974 as deputy principal at the school for special needs children. Following retirement from the school, Sister took an active interest in the Bethany Home, which was established as a place for poor women with sickly babies. The home aimed to provide a nurturing environment for mothers and babies, teaching the mothers infant care and domestic skills, while attending to the immediate health needs of the babies.

However, the Police started to bring abandoned babies to Bethany Home and in no time the Home had outgrown its tiny four-room premises and its original function. It soon evolved into the Bethany Home of today – a place of safety for abandoned and abused babies and infants from 0-6 years, located at Ikhwezi Lokusa. Bethany Home is registered for 70 infants but typically has around 85 children in its care and sometimes as many as 100.

Increasingly Bethany has received a number of children into its care with HIV/AIDS. These children currently represent about 10 percent of the overall number. They present special challenges for staff. Babies in care who are HIV positive are weak, malnourished and susceptible to every ailment. They require intensive monitoring and nursing care and have special dietary requirements. Even when antiretroviral (ARV) medicines are started they are still Bethany's most vulnerable children who develop physically and intellectually at a much slower rate.

All the Bethany children are African and Xhosa speaking. As well as enhancing their education, Bethany aims to keep them in touch with Xhosa culture and language. Very tiny un-named babies that arrive at Bethany are given a Xhosa name by Sister Mary Paule.

Sister Mary Paule is an extraordinary woman – one of those few people one meets in life who is truly awesome and whom you feel privileged to have met. The seventy-five year old's diminutive stature belies a formidable strength and will and she has a warm and mischievous sense of humour.

One of Jan and my most memorable experiences will be accompanying Sister to the local electricity depot to complain about the loss of supply for a lengthy period.

You can see everyone scuttle on her arrival. And those that she passes on route to the head engineer's office, greet her with a "Hello Sister, how are you?" To which she replies, "I would be much happier with power!"

The head engineer has by now been alerted that Sister is on her way and he tries desperately not to be found. She enters his office unannounced and asks him to raise his right hand and promise to have the power back on in one hour; otherwise *"you can come out yourself and work out how to cook lunch for 84*

children". On the way out there are a group of workers standing around and she remarks "What are you standing here for, there is no problem here, get in your trucks and go to Ikhwezi and fix my problem". The power wasn't on in the hour, but it was fixed by midday.

There was major industrial disruption in South Africa in June-July this year when public servants went on strike for over a month. Worst affected by the strike were schools, with students missing important study time and hospitals, which had to drastically cut back services. Sister was heard to tell all the Bethany children and particularly the babies when the strike commenced that they were not to get sick until the strike was over. The plea worked: remarkably there were no serious cases of illness during that month – mid winter in Mthatha!

The first VSA volunteer to work at Bethany was with nursing skills trainer Jill Bennett. Jill worked with staff to improve the dietary needs and general health and well-being of the babies and children. The plaque outside the nurse's office testifies to her contribution and dedication to Bethany's children.

Jill established all the foundation stones, but there was clearly a need for VSA to provide another nurse to put in place the building blocks and further the skills transfer and training of local people.

Jan Barber stepped in as Bethany's second hard-working New Zealand nurse and completes her two-year assignment in January 2008.

Jan and Jill can reflect proudly that the general health of the children is greatly improved thanks to better nutrition and greater understanding on the part of the staff of the importance of balanced diets. The children's overall health is much improved, with staff now more aware of the importance of hygiene, reducing cross infection and monitoring the children in order to pick up minor ailments quickly before they become major health problems.

Given the type of facility Bethany is, and that most children who come to Bethany are suffering some degree of malnourishment, injury or infection, occasionally a child will not survive. But the work of Jill and Jan has greatly enhanced Bethany's ability to care for its children and has reduced reliance on the hospital or doctors for intervention when children become unwell.

But the end of an era is nigh. Sister Mary Paule retired at the end of August 2007 and a new Sister from the same order has stepped up to take over the running of the home.

Sister Mary Paule will remain at the convent and we know that she will continue to take an active interest in the growth and development of the children. Indeed, we hope she will continue her current routine of popping into the nursery (soon to be renamed The Sister Mary Paule Nursery) at around 7pm to spend quiet time with the babies before they go to sleep.

VSA volunteer Joanne Lentfer has recently joined Bethany as a management adviser. Her role is to assist the transition from Sister Mary Paule to the new management and support the new director with systems and processes that will ensure a strong organisation in the long term.

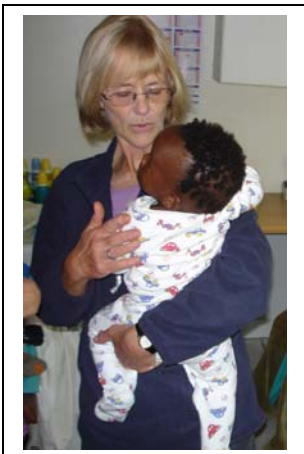


Photo captions

The plaque at Bethany dedicated to Jill Bennett. Jan Barber and some of the children. VSA Africa Programme Manager Thomas Banda with Jan Barber, Sister Mary Paule and Joanne Lentfer.

