

A 2nd letter from Pietermaritzburg, Kwa Zulu Natal,
South Africa Thursday, 29th March 2007

Dear Doll Makers Everywhere

There is no quiet hush of concentrated sewing activity in our workshop this morning. Today we have a riot of laughter, talking and learning about the importance of play in a child's life. For these past two days we have joined our third group of 12 participants, 11 women and one young man, in days three and four of the workshop program. Njabulo, Phethi and Dudu, from the RSBSC team, have led us in a variety of reflective exercises about the importance of listening to children and opening the world of play.

This is our final day of workshop activity. Georgia and Irene taught three groups of women the skills to make and dress a doll. With each group we saw the same wonderful transformation as participants began tentatively, then, as the dolls began to take form in their hands, they became inspired and delighted by their doll. Their fear and self doubt slipped away as plans for future dolls and thoughts of those they will teach to make their own dolls took the forefront of their mind. As I wrote last week, some had never before held a pair of scissors or a needle and thread. Their creative response to the teaching has been fantastic. They are all so excited by the world of possibility that opens before them.

There are 7 Gogos (grandmothers and great grandmothers) in this third group. They have shared deeply and about their lives; it is a privilege to meet them, to share with them and to learn from them. Within each group, as well as the energy and commitment, there is a sense of profound sadness. Many participants have shared their stories of loss. One woman has buried all five of her brothers, others have buried partners and one, two, three or more children. Some of the women live with HIV infection, and although currently well, they face an uncertain future.

The women do not dwell upon their sadness; it lives with them and in them. We have formed strong bonds of friendship with the workshop participants and our hearts have widened in response to the courage, generosity and indomitable spirit shown and shared. Zulu women are very stylish. Their hair and head wear is spectacular and provides an endless source of inspiration for future dolls. When Irene and Georgia, each sporting a colourful scarf wrapped Zulu-style around their head, walked in to the group this morning, they were met with a spontaneous cheer followed by joyful laughter.

As the participants embrace the games and exercises the RSBSC (Rob Smetherham Bereavement Services for Children) team use skilfully to engage, energise and teach the group, there is a more shared laughter. Many of the women are of "traditional build" and no longer young. Not one of them shies away from dancing "shake banana, shake, shake banana" or from entering boisterously into games remembered from childhood and shared with the group. Tears of laughter are wiped from eyes and fierce competition is stirred as the tussle for the last chair or a place in the circle is contested. The music of their bodies and their voices has taught us a great deal. Inspired by our Zulu sisters, in one of this morning's games Georgia showed us a high kick worthy of the Australian Ballet. Irene demonstrates a lithe and

lovely bottom wiggle, and I have enjoyed being a shaking banana when I put the video camera down.

Workshop participants have committed to taking their doll making expertise and new knowledge about listening to children and play to share within their communities. Tomorrow we will meet with the RSBSC team to reflect on the workshops, and to make plans for future collaboration. Then after a few days adventure in the Southern Drakensburgs this weekend, on Wednesday we will meet our TREE (Training and Resources in Early Education) colleagues in Durban before returning home next Thursday. The future looks bright, with ever deepening relationships with CINDI (Children in Distress), RSBSC and TREE and we are confident there will be many opportunities for Uthando to make further contribution to the lives of children and families in KZN.

Your generous contribution to Uthando is already making a difference to lives of children and families here. One doll, distributed by the Sizabantwana Network, facilitated a young girl to tell her teacher about something that was happening to her in her family that she needed help to stop. This alone would be worth the creative effort of 10,000 dolls; and they have brought this and so much more.

We have some marvellous portraits of the women with their dolls and we share these with you on our return to Australia next week. Plans for a video demonstrating the dolls work in KZN are also in discussion.

With our love and thanks, as ever

Julie, Georgia & Irene.

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