

Saturday, 16th August 2014,
King Shaka Airport, Durban

Dear Uthando Family

A Letter from KZN

It has been a rich and happy week in KZN and wonderful to share time with Rachel and Robyn and the dlalanathi team. When I arrived on Friday 8th I drove to Pietermaritzburg and spent the weekend at Greenlands, where Uthando visitors have traditionally stayed over the years. I visited dlalanathi's new offices then enjoyed some social time with Rachel and her family. On Sunday Robyn drove me to the Midlands for lunch. The landscape is dry and they are awaiting some rain but still beautiful; I felt the now familiar sense of love for this land and her people and a deep sense of privilege and pleasure to be among friends.

On Sunday afternoon I drove to Durban where I stayed at Essenwood House: a gracious and comfortable B&B with a lovely garden and views beyond to the city and the harbour. It was lovely, with time for solitude and quiet after busy days at the International Association for Child Psychiatrists and Allied Professionals (IACAPAP) 21st Conference. I was thrilled that Claudie, Gugu, Kailee, Linda, Rachel & Robyn, from dlalanathi were with me each day of the conference, representing their work and meeting colleagues from Africa and other parts of the world. There were 850 delegates from 57 nations, including 32 Australians.

I presented a paper on Wednesday, Claudie presented a paper on Thursday, and Rachel and Gugu presented a workshop on Friday. All three of the dlalanathi women did a splendid job. Claudie, who is an educational psychologist and now heads the training unit, presented some of the work she did as part of her degree studies. She discussed the difficult and challenging task of completing an educational assessment of rural southern African children with tests devised for a very different population. Claudie was very well prepared and presented eloquently. Gugu said she was nervous but once she stood at the microphone she shone, immediately engaged her audience and spoke clearly and very well. She said "No one works harder than the dlalanathi team in our strategic planning." She then outlined how the clarity of their purpose about what communities need and what will work. As you have experienced, Rachel always speaks well. Her passion, compassion, intelligence and capacity for bringing coherence to complex ideas, is a gift and a joy. Rachel told the enthralled audience of the power of making a doll and the compassion and reflection it evokes in their work within communities.

I had taken six dolls with me; they adorned the meeting room during the session I chaired and I then gave them to some of Friday's workshop participants as a reminder of what is possible. Each person who received a doll was so thrilled. I gave the monkey to a young man from the Department of Health. He was delighted and said his son would love it so he was not sure it would ever get to his office. He was very interested to talk with the dlalanathi team. I have my fingers crossed that there will be some positive outcomes for dlalanathi from the conference, beside their felt excitement about their work and the affirmation they received.

Conference highlights for me included Olayinka Omigbodum's key note address "The rise of CAMH [Child & Adolescent Mental Health] in Africa and less developed regions of the world: Trends, trials and triumphs". Olayinka is a Nigerian professor of child psychiatry at Ibandan University. Olayinka is the first African to become President of IACAPAP, and she works tirelessly to promote the mental health and emotional well being of children and young people in her country and other parts of world: "There is no child health without child mental health". She is a warm and loving woman and is an inspiration to me and to many.

There were 51 Nigerian child psychiatrists, psychiatry trainees, and other CAMH professionals at the conference.

It was my honour to introduce a young Nigerian psychiatry trainee, Aishatu Abubakar-Abdullateef, an impressive young woman, with a six week old daughter, who eloquently presented her findings from a research project she did among the Almajiris children in Zaria, North West Nigeria. I learned a great deal, previously knowing nothing of these 7million young boys who are sent from their homes, some as young as 3, to join the household of a Mullah to receive a Q'Oranic education: one graduates when one can recite the Q'Oran by heart! Sometimes up to 100 boys live with the Mullah, who has no means of feeding them and they must beg for a living. Some of them are never visited by their poor families and do not know how to go home. Aishatu spoke warmly of her Q'Oranic education, which she received alongside regular school while living at home. Her mission is to work with families, particularly women, to help them to find/create ways for their sons to live in the family while receiving both Q'Oranic and regular schooling. It was riveting and she was magnificent.

My other highlights were the keynote address, "Exploring the significance of African language and belief systems in addressing psychological wounds", by Nomfundo Walaza. Nomfundo is the CEO of the Desmond Tute Peace Centre in Cape Town. She spoke with such poetry and reminded us that the more acts of compassion and generosity we receive, the more humane we become".

Linda Richter's keynote, "Children and HIV: Global challenges and successes" was Linda at her best – clear, powerful and holding nothing back.

I have attached a copy of my paper which is a rewrite of one some of you will have read – it includes a quote from a recent article that Linda Richter wrote with Lynne Mofenson when they edited the recent special edition of the AIDS Journal titled Children Born Into Families Affected By HIV. Among my slides I showed three excerpts from Goodness & Happiness. Each time I see that film I am reminded what a splendid job Nat did for us.

At the closing ceremony Olayinka read the Durban Declaration – a statement of intent for IACAPAP's future work. It should be on their website soon, and when it is I hope we will be able to create a link with our website. A powerful document. I was moved to hear it read publically for the first time, and proud that the dlalanathi team and I were party to its creation.

It has been a busy and rich week. I am pleased to be on my way home.

My loving best wishes and thanks to you all.

As ever,

Julie