

The Sad, Sweet Tale of Murewa's Philanthropist

BY JAIROS SAUNYAMA

UPON arrival at Heather Chimhoga Orphan Care (HCOC) centre deep in rural Murewa North, one is greeted by modern and state-of-the-art infrastructure at the institution.

Sandwiched by Goromonzi and Shamva districts, the centre has become home to thousands of orphans in the poverty-stricken district, with the majority of beneficiaries having their fees paid while a total of five schools in the area are currently under a school feeding programme.

The centre has been taking care of several child-headed families while water projects have been installed at surrounding schools and health centres.

However, the sweet story of HCOC was born out of tragedy, as the lead person, Chimhoga from Nyamashato and a vendor in the neighbouring South Africa died mysteriously after initiating the idea to rescue children from abject poverty as well as empower orphans, some of whom have since obtained university degrees.

Chimhoga, a member of the Presbyterian Church in South Africa returned home to Nyamashato in Murewa with her white friends who, upon arrival, were shocked to learn that the local primary school was facing closure due to dilapidated infrastructure, according to HCOC chief executive officer Albert Mukondwa. Mukondwa, who has been at the helm of the centre since its formation over a decade ago, said tragedy struck when Chimhoga was found dead at a relative's house in Harare in 1996 while en-route from South Africa.

"Together with her white friends, Heather brought gifts to the vulnerable members of the society in her rural village and promised that they were going to renovate the dilapidating infrastructure at Nyamashato Primary School," he said.

"After spending sometime in the rural areas, tragedy struck when Heather was found dead in her room at a relative's house in Sunningdale. It was sad," recalled Mukondwa, who was also an environmental technician in the area.

The testimonies about Chimhoga's charitable works attracted the attention of the United States-based Rotarians, Ralph and Roberta Pippitt who, in 1997, visited Nyamashato and renovated the school that has since become a modern example of learning infrastructure in Murewa district.

The Pippitt family also raised funds for the refurbishment of four more other schools in the area, among them teachers' houses.

The Rotarians, later led the motion to establish the HCOC in honour of the late philanthropist, a move that gave birth to the centre — a success story in a rural set-up.

Currently, a state-of-the art clinic is being constructed while a thriving Moringa production project will leave many with envy. The centre also has a flourishing chicken rearing project of up to 21 000 birds, with the meat being sold at the organisation's butchery located in urban Murewa, about 25km away.

Richard Kadyauta, a social worker at HCOC, said their operations have yielded positive results in empowering the orphans.

“The school feeding programme in this area among other endeavours has been of great impact and we are happy about that. The most educated child is the orphan, the most dressed child is an orphan and this has been motivating. We buy uniforms, pay fees for even those who are in boarding schools. Some of the beneficiaries are now graduates and that is refreshing,” he said.

As of December 2019, the centre catered for 234 orphans while a total of 810 including ECDs are on the feeding programme where each beneficiary getting two meals per day — a move that has resulted in the reduction of school dropouts due to hunger. At the schools, the centre established well-equipped kitchens with modern cookers all sourced by the Rotarians. HCOC has so far taken total ownership of 15 child headed families in the area.

At the centre is also a state-of-the-art safe house that will house at least six children with the officials waiting for government to officially register them. The safe house contains a television set and a well-equipped kitchen.