

TOMORROW IS OUR CONCERN

written by Robert Edgar Walker

The trip to the school came midway through our holiday, giving us a chance to get a bit of colour and acclimatize ourselves to “the Gambian way of life”. I didn’t really know what to expect, although seeing all those programmes on television, had, I guess, in some ways, tarnished reality.

We left mid morning for what was probably a 20 minute walk and already at that time of the day the heat was swelteringly hot. Once we were off the main thoroughfare, we had to negotiate numerous interlinked roads. These were little more than dirt tracks and as the name suggests, they were very dirty, dry and uneven in most parts. These were also, quite often, the locals dumping ground for domestic rubbish and as you can expect, the smells in the heat were somewhat overpowering. As we got further in, the standards of housing and living seemed to deteriorate quite dramatically although there were glimmers of new development, as more and more ‘outside’ monies appear.

We passed the old school on our way, which was nothing more than a hut the size of a portakabin. I was told this would have probably housed 150 children!

The new school, just down the road, didn’t look much like a school, until you see the ornate wrought iron gates ‘The Lisa Kent Memorial School’. These lead you into a purpose built block, with the headmasters living accommodation on the right, a shop unit and headmasters room on the left and at the end, three identical, self sufficient classrooms, nurseries 1, 2 and 3.

As we passed the headmasters office, the words ‘We believe the best interest of the child should be a priority’ were emblazoned in white italics on the stonework. We were greeted by him, and his headteacher, Marian Jarju, and given a tour of the classrooms. In each, ranging in age, we were greeted by a cacophony of noise and excitement, and in each, welcomed perfectly respectfully and given a rendition of the alphabet and the days of the week, which were both executed in perfect English. In the last classroom, I counted 39 children all aged 3. Apparently not everybody was back in school, being the first day back. Even with numbers this high of a total of 154, each classroom showed controlled discipline and a keenness to show off their newly learned skills. Apparently the building work has moved forward greatly in little more than 12 months and although I have no comparisons from last year, marvel at the standard of work.

You can admire the ingenuity of the polished, mosaic flooring, the man made water system and shower rooms, all completed on both limited budget and overall resources.

The one thing however, that really stands out in my memory about the school itself are the children themselves. Their tireless energy and enthusiasm. I was overwhelmed by their generosity of spirit and gushing emotion. Those big smiles and piercing eyes remain with me. These were eyes of inquisitiveness and perhaps fear. But they were also eyes of hope. Now this may be a strong word hope, but the Oxford Dictionary says that “It is a feeling of trust, expectation and desire”. You see we owe our continued support to these children and many more like them if nothing else, as their tomorrow should be our concern.