



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

International Friendship Visit Isaac Newton High School, Kateera, Masaka

July 2017



Contestant, judges and prizewinners of Reading for Pleasure Competition

Reading for Pleasure

During our latest International Friendship visit to Isaac Newton High School the final of the Reading for Pleasure Competition was held. Many students entered the competition. Each chose to read a work of fiction from the school library. In the heats, students wrote a one-page summary of the book and, on the

basis of this, their English teacher picked the finalists.

The finals were held in the school hall in the presence of the whole school. To ensure audibility, a PA system was an essential requirement. The judging panel, comprising four international visitors, picked a page from each chosen book for the student to read

aloud to the whole school. Each contestant gave a short summary of the key points of the book, without reference to notes. They were then asked a series of quite rigorous questions about the book by the panel and their English teacher – the meaning of key words, details of the plot and lessons to be drawn from the book.

We were impressed by the extent of each student's engagement with the task and the competition's ability to enrapture the whole school. Eventually a winning boy and girl were selected



from each class and prizes of dictionaries were presented to winners, with a smaller prize for the runners up. UHST provided the prizes, which were awarded by Ezra Mulwana, the Headteacher, and Steve Hurd, Chair of UHST.

The competition was the culmination of a two year Reading for Pleasure Project. Initially, one of our new trustees, Ed Schmidt, from St Louis Ethical Society, informed us about a Reading for Pleasure Project, which he had helped to promote through the Teachers for East Africa Network. A small group within TEA had read a large volume of books written for children by East African and writers from other parts of Africa and selected those they felt were well written and likely to stimulate a love of reading in school children.

Two years ago, UHST bought all of the books recommended by TEA for the schools we support, and many others besides. Each school nominated a Reading for Pleasure Coordinator to encourage the students into the reading habit. They did this by setting up a Reading Club in each school, where students could meet to share information on books they had been reading. As Humanists we place great emphasis on giving young people the skills to read widely and to value books as sources of pleasure and information. These skills are crucial if they are to become

autonomous learners and freethinking adults. The Project has been a huge success and in the week following the competition every reading book in the school library disappeared from the shelves as reading mania spread through the school. School staff, and English teachers in particular, are to be congratulated on the efforts they have made to promote the project and the competition. This is an initiative that UHST hopes to support for some years to come.

International Friendship Visit

Our party of visitors this year included three UHST Trustees, Steve and Hilary Hurd and Glenda Miller; Glenda's husband Derek; Renate Bauer, Chair of the German Humanist Organisation and Humanist speaker and celebrant from Pfalz; and Peter Furness, Chair of Humanist Aid, Australia. Below are pictures of the group (excluding Peter at the top, and Steve at the bottom). The lower picture shows visitors dancing with school staff at the party held to close the Friendship Visit.



Peter Furness had visited the school twice before and was "very, very impressed by the progress of the school" since his last visit. For Renate, Glenda and Derek it was their first

visit to Africa and they were all hugely moved and impressed by their visit to the school.

The first thing you see is the school sign proclaiming proudly the *Secular Humanist* credentials of the school.



Then, on meeting the students, their off-duty Tee-shirt proclaims the school motto, "To Reason not to Believe".



On arrival we were introduced to senior staff and the Headteacher, Ezra Mulwana gave us a tour of the school. The site has developed hugely since we started to support the school in 2006 and it was clear that Ezra was very proud to show us around. The school looks impressive – especially in comparison with other rural schools in Uganda.

We arrived on a Sunday, which, this week, was hair day. The local barber was busy cutting the girls' hair. All schoolgirls in Uganda have a regulation short back and sides. This is both to keep down lice infections and to make hair more easily managed.



There has been a lot of work on the site in the past few months, including a huge improvement in the paths and roadways.



A large retaining wall and drains had been laid to prevent water from rushing through classrooms during flash floods.



The health clinic now had a water supply and a septic tank. This means that Sarah, the nurse who lives in the clinic, and sick students staying in the two in-patient rooms, now have access to running water in a sink, shower and WC. This was a huge and necessary improvement.



In the picture below Sarah is explaining about the common illnesses she encounters among the students – malaria and upper respiratory infections – and how she diagnoses and treats them. She has state-of-the-art dipstick blood tests for identifying malaria and the latest combined therapies for treating the disease.



For the third year running that UHST has bought packs of re-useable sanitary pads from the Uganda-Dutch NGO Afripads for each of the girl students. These pads, which are washable and last for a whole year, have made a huge difference to the girls. The pads are comfortable to wear and absorb discharges during menstruation. Since we have provided them, absence from lessons by girls at the time of menstruation has stopped, and this has had a huge effect of their personal confidence and academic performance. The next picture shows a girl carrying a box of the pads into the training session led by Sarah, the school nurse..



Afripads is a local enterprise and the picture below shows the factory in Masaka, a few miles from the school, where the Afripads are made.



Here are the very happy girls receiving their packs of Afripads following the school training session.



New Girls' Hostel

In 2015 we visited the school with Ed Schmidt, a leading member of St Louis Ethical Society. At the time, the existing girls' hostel was grossly overcrowded and this caused us all great concern. When students are packed closely together in sleeping quarters, coughs and diseases spread quickly and there is the obvious problem of evacuation in the event of fire. When Ed returned to the States he spoke about the problem with his organisation and they approached us with the offer of raising £30,000, which we judged would be sufficient to fund a second hostel. The fund-raising appeal was successful, though, in the event, the project was over-budget, costing £44,000. There had been initial problems preparing the site and it was realised that the hostel needed to be larger, catering for 96 girls, and of higher specification.



The resulting building is first rate and a model for how hostels should be built. It has 12 large airy rooms with ample space to accommodate 8 girls to a room sharing double bunk beds. The building has electric lighting; ceilings to prevent mosquitos carrying malaria from room to room over partition walls, and adjoining wash rooms and flush toilets. In the public area outside the hostel there are clotheslines where students can dry their washing and areas on the veranda where they can smooth their clothes using irons heated by burning charcoal.



On the last day of our visit we formally opened the hostel and I told the students and staff about the Ethical Society of St Louis and the work they had done to raise the money. After the opening (below) teachers and local families were taken on a guided tour.



Everyone associated with the school feels an enormous sense of pride in this fine addition to the school estate.



Above are some of the residents of the hostel who were delighted to show off their new home to the school visitors and families. Below a girl uses a charcoal iron to smooth her school uniform on the steps of the hostel.



As a very nice additional touch, at the suggestion of St Louis Ethical Society, the girls were asked to choose a name for their new hostel. A small committee of students with a

member of staff searched the internet for information about prominent women around the world, who had made a contribution to the education of girls. A shortlist of 4 names was selected, including:

Angelique Kidgo – the musician from Benin, UNICEF International Goodwill Ambassador and founder of the Batonga Foundation, which focuses on empowering young women and girls in Africa through secondary school and higher education.

President Michelle Bachelet of Chile who, as Executive Director of UN Women, championed the Fund for Gender Equality which provides grants to promote equal gender access to quality education.

Prime Minister Erna Solberg, who led Norway’s funding of a new UN initiative to promote greater access to and quality of education for girls in Malawi.

Malala Yusafzai, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, founder of the Malala Fund, which advocates for international, national and local level changes that improve girls’ access to a high quality education.

Hustings were held in which different girls advocated for each nominee and this was followed by a secret ballot (girls voting below) and public vote count (the following picture).





After a closely fought contest, the girls chose the name “Malala Yusufzai Hostel” for their new home. It was good to see women’s solidarity extending across continents and this example of democracy in action.

Pictured below are student performers at the celebration to mark the opening of the new girls’ hostel.



Contributions by Visitors

As our visit to the school lasted several days we had abundant opportunities to interact with Isaac Newton staff and students. Our talks and activities included:

“*Evolution and the History of Life on Earth*” (Senior 1, Hilary)

“*Talking About Ugandan History*” religious rivalries, colonialism and recent political developments (Senior 4, Steve).

“*What Makes Good Law: enacting out a court case*” (Senior 5 and 6, Derek and Glenda)

“*Growth & Development in Uganda*” (Senior 5 & 6 Economics Students, Steve)

“*The World Under the Microscope: how to use a compound binocular microscope*” (Senior 5 & 6, Hilary)

“*Humanism in Australia and Germany*” (Senior 1,2 & 3 and Humanist Students Association, Peter and Renate)

“*Creating a Happy Society*” (Senior 1, 2 & 3, Steve)



Teaching school choir (above) to sing “*Don’t Worry, Be Happy*” (Steve) and “*I am Free in my Thoughts*” (Renate) – with a performance to the school.

We also had good opportunities to talk with individual students. Below Hilary discusses a topic with A-level Biology students and a student outlines to Steve his current piece of work in Geography.





In addition, Steve led a session with the teaching staff discussing the implications of being a Humanist School for styles of teaching and learning and for the management of discipline in the absence of coercion.

Lesson Observation

We had time to wander around the school and see normal lessons in progress. On arrival at the school, on the Sunday, there was a practical Physics lesson in progress. Peter Kisirinya, the school Director, is Head of Physics in a government day school for 4 days during the week. He arranges to do all the science practical work at Isaac Newton over the weekends. The school has a large science lab and we have provided a good and growing stock of apparatus and chemicals for experiments.



In the lesson we observed, senior 4 students (who take their O-level examinations in 3 months time) were measuring the change in resistance in a circuit as you increase the number of batteries in series.



It always seems rather special to see students from different Christian and Moslem backgrounds working harmoniously on science experiments.



Visitors in the science practical lesson:



We saw an excellent Geography revision lesson on dendritic drainage patterns by Ezra Mulwana, the Headteacher. Ezra is a charismatic teacher who has a good sense of humour and creates a very pleasant classroom atmosphere that is conducive to effective learning. By being active in the classroom he

sets a good example for the young teachers coming into the school.



Students figure out the workings of the heart on the chalkboard:



As pay levels are still low, the school has to rely upon using newly qualified teachers and students who are still undergoing training. These teachers bring in youthful enthusiasm and an ability to relate to students but they are often still learning the finer points of the craft of teaching.

Since the re-establishment of the East African Community there has been a push to persuade all member states to promote Kiswahili as a second common language, alongside English. Isaac Newton School introduced Swahili two years ago and it is now well established in the timetable. In the lesson below, students were learning to sing the East African Anthem in Swahili.



We were shown very impressive examples of artwork that students had created as part of their Fine Art coursework. This includes painting and drawing, fabric printing, wood carving and pottery.



Humanist Ethos

As you enter and leave Isaac Newton School you cannot fail to see the *Welcome* and *Have a Safe Journey* signs, which have been erected by the School's Humanist Students' Association.



Renate Bauer and I had a meeting with the 50 student members of the Humanist Association. They took turns to tell us about their aims as an Association and how they wanted to work together to improve the lives of the very poorest people in their local communities.

The students took us to see work they had been doing in the community and they were, justifiably, very proud of what they had done, which was greatly appreciated by the very poor people they had helped. The beneficiaries included the elderly and mothers left with no income to cope with families after the loss of a father.

During our tour of the local area there was a heavy and prolonged thunderstorm and we had to find shelter wherever we could – under mango trees and the awnings of local buildings.

Students had identified 20 homes that could benefit from their help. Projects undertaken include: making and repairing the mud and wattle screens around long-drop toilets, creating screened areas where people can wash in private, placing containers of water on racks for hand washing and constructing drying racks where utensils and clothes can be placed after washing. The pictures below show a drying rack, a screened washing area and hand-washing station.



We were so impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment of the group that UHST has agreed to provide the group with additional

funds to buy materials for their community work and also to organise events to mark secular festivals such as Darwin Day, Human Rights Day, International Women's Day, World Environment Day and World Humanist Day.

Jointly with the local community, the school has set up an Isaac Newton Community Based Organisation (CBO). This brings local subsistence farmers together in a cooperative arrangement where they bulk buy seed, fertiliser, organic pesticide and other farm materials and sell them at cost to farmers. The school gatehouse is being used as the CBO farm shop, where farmers can buy materials that will help to raise productivity and incomes.

The school is a genuine family and community initiative. Peter Kisirinya is the school Director, his sister Winnie, who has just been awarded a degree in accounting, is the school bursar, and his brother Edward, is the site manager. Below is a picture of the three of them with their elderly parents. Their extended family have farmed the land on which the school is placed as subsistence farmers for generations and they have strong community support around them.



Derek Miller, in the visiting party, expressed the following sentiments after our visit:

"Isaac Newton School proved to be all if not more than we might reasonably have expected from a humanist school. A wonderful ethos flowing down from the director and headmaster was demonstrated in many ways, nowhere more so than in the work of the

student humanist association in digging latrines and carrying out other works of construction in the impoverished local village. The positive way in which they approached their work was the best possible application of the maxim that in giving to others you give to yourself. We felt that our investment in the school was reaping a return that no investment banker could ever match and we look forward to increasing that commitment now that we have seen its outcomes."

School Director's Report

Peter Kisirinya prepared a written report for the Board of the not-for-profit company limited by guarantee that runs Isaac Newton High School and he spoke to the whole school and members of the community at a celebration held on the last day of our visit. He made the following comments:

Isaac Newton High School is a secular Humanist Institution offering High School education to boys and girls without any discrimination. It works on an egalitarian principle and respects human rights for the learners and workers. The school currently has a total enrolment of 427 students: 243 girls and 184 boys. There are 146 boarding girls and 97 day girls. There are 118 boarding boys and 66 day boys.

The school employs 49 workers out of which 42 are teachers many of whom are young women and men who could hardly find work elsewhere. 15% of the teaching staff comprises former students of the school who have returned to the school after gaining degrees and teacher training in institutions of higher learning. 40% of the teaching staff is now full time.

Our school, unlike religious ones allows workers and students to fully exercise their freedom to worship or not to worship.

The school has stimulated tremendous positive changes in the community around. For example the school pays 12 million shillings in salaries and wages every month and much of this is spent in the community. The staff buys

food and other items from local markets and shops, rents paid by teachers for housing in local villages and other utilities. Peter Kisirinya addressing a gathering of the whole school and local community members:



School building projects employ workers from the community. For example, the contractor working on the new girls' hostel employed 24 young people from the community and he procured many of the construction materials, such as bricks and timber, from the locality.

The economic impact of the school has been tremendous! Bodaboda (Motor cycle) riders derive an income from providing transport to school staff. The locality benefits from school purchases of foodstuffs and other necessities. The school tuck shop sells local produce..



In November, UHST provided a £10,000 contribution to connect the school to mains electricity via a new sub-station being constructed 2 km away. The balance of £80,000 is coming from the World Bank via the Uganda Government. There has been a long bureaucratic delay in approving the passage of the funds through parliament, but

this has now been done and the work is due to begin shortly. The project will not only bring much needed electricity to the school, it will also extend power to homes in 6 villages around the school. This initiative will transform the local economy and standard of living of the area. The local community has experienced major life improvement as a result of the school and the funds that UHST has brought in to support it. Everyone is hugely grateful for the commitment shown by supporters of the charity over the past 10 years.

Scholarship Students

Hilary met all of the students supported on UHST scholarships during our stay at Isaac Newton. It was a particular pleasure to meet Senior 1 sponsored students for the first time and learn about their family backgrounds.

Typical of our new sponsored students are Miriam and Timothy. Miriam is 13 and has three siblings. Her father died some time ago and her mother earns a very small income selling basic goods, but this is not enough to pay school fees. Miriam gained the top grade in her Primary Leaving Exam and aspires to be a surgeon. She likes reading novels and is in the choir.



Timothy is 14 and also has 3 siblings. His family are subsistence farmers and they have had a very difficult time as last year's drought caused the harvest to fail and they had no source of cash income. Timothy is the class monitor and likes playing football. On Sundays, he washes his clothes and revises his lessons. He gained a very high mark in his Primary Leaving Exam and wants to be a doctor.



All the students we support are boarders and the girls are delighted with the new hostel that has just been opened at the school. Boarding keeps the students in a safe environment and provides them with three meals a day and study facilities in the evening and at weekends. Most students come from extremely poor homes, with no running water or electricity. Below are pictures of supported children from Senior 2 and Senior 6.



Despite their challenging backgrounds, all of our sponsored students are happy and healthy and are always smiling and laughing. They study extremely hard and have very high aspirations. They all expressed their gratitude to their sponsors for the chance they have been given to have a Secondary Education.

Priorities

Over the coming period the school has asked for our help in providing resources to meet the following challenges:

1) The growth in student numbers has brought the need for more classrooms so

that we can reduce class sizes from over 100, by operating two classes in each year. We urgently need a new block of 4 classrooms, which will cost up to £40,000 (UHST has already raised £26,000 towards this building). Below carpenters are making stools to cater for the larger number of students.



- 2) Doubling the number of classes will increase the bill for teachers' salaries and this will put pressure on the schools cash flow. Higher fee income from the greater number of students should have covered this. However, most students come from poor families and the very low local incomes have been depressed by unusually low rainfall reducing crop yields. This prevents the school from raising fees and has also increased the number of families in arrears with their payments. Help from UHST to ease cash flow pressures in the forthcoming period would be appreciated.
- 3) Lack of teachers' houses. This has caused a large portion of the income to go in transport fees for teachers travelling long distances into school. Having housing on site will help with this and also mean that there are always teachers present to supervise students living on the school site as boarders. It will also help us to retain good teachers.
- 4) Boys are overcrowded in their hostel. There is need to have a new boys' hostel (costing about £40,000).

- 5) The main school water tank is only 5000 litres capacity, yet with increased numbers of students water is needed in large quantity. There is need to have enlarged water storage capacity.
- 6) Uganda National Examinations Board have abruptly increased fees to sit final examinations. This is forcing some students to drop out of school without taking their exams. We have been trying to help needy students from school funds but need outside help if we are to cope.
- 7) The playing field we use is a long walk away at the top of a hill beyond the nearest village. We need help to level land for a new sports field nearby the school. This may cost £8,000.

If you feel you or your group would like to contribute to meeting any of these needs then please contact stevehurd@uhst.org (01782 750338).

We have reluctantly had to increase the sum required to sponsor a student to £300 per annum, now that all sponsored students are boarders. Many sponsors give £150 a year, with two sponsors sharing the costs of one boarding scholarship. We urgently need more supporters to commit to helping to support bright but needy students who would benefit greatly from the liberal secular education offered in the Humanist schools.

Donation and standing order forms can be found at:

<http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>

Steve Hurd
Chair, Uganda Humanist Schools Trust
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