

VOLUNTEERS TO ASSIST CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES (VACD)

Progress Report & Summary – December 2011 to June 2012

The inaugural meeting to launch the VACD program was held on 27th December, 2011, at St. Joseph's College, Bandarawela.

The Provincial Governor – Uva Province, Hon.Mr.Nanda Matthew was represented by his Secretary Mrs. Kanthi Mayadunne.

The keynote address was delivered by Dr. (Mrs.) Kumudini Cooray, Consultant Pediatrician at the Base Hospital, Diyatalawa.

Concurrent to the inaugural program, a Health Clinic for the children was conducted by the staff of the "*Child Guidance Clinic*" from the Base Hospital, Diyatalawa.

The meeting concluded with the presenting of gifts to participating children with disabilities.

Thus began the first step towards what is likely to be a very long journey for the children, their families and us.

On Saturday, 25th February, 2012 a one day workshop was arranged for the parents and supporters of the VACD program. Forty two participants met at St. Joseph's College, Bandarawela to discuss and share their understanding and perceptions about the complex subject of rights of the children, their privileges, desires and special needs etc. given they are differently abled children.

For many of these participants, this was the first ever opportunity for them to share their burdens, problems and particular difficulties at a public gathering. All of us were overwhelmed by the outpouring of the bottled up sadness, despair and grief and the relief and joy expressed by many parents that there was hope now for their children. This was a powerful emotion that swept through the gathering. We all felt the pain, desperation and suffering that was common to all children, parents and families. No parent had ever given any serious consideration to the future of their children because they had lived their lives on a day-to-day basis, until this moment. The meeting was indeed a blessing for many parents who now have some hope and joy that the VACD project will open new doors and opportunities for their children.

The workshop was conducted by Dr.Pushpakumara Weerakoon of Diyatalawa Base Hospital and Mr. Milton Perera – Senior Training Consultant, Centre for Economic & Social Rights.

Parallel to this workshop, we also carried out a *Special Skills Training Program* for the children with disabilities with the help of some specially trained teachers and the *Sunera* Foundation. Video footage on this event will be made available to all of you very soon.

After several informal discussions and deliberations among the few founder members of the group, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was unanimously adopted at the first general meeting with project leaders and the advisory panel on 7th March, 2012 at *Ranolu Mahal*, Bandarawela.

According to the MOU there will be a Project Holder, Team Leader and an Auditor. However, the group will function under a philosophy of a *Collective responsible Leadership*. Moreover, if deemed necessary, the MOU will be modified to accommodate and meet new needs and challenges of the future. The project operational period will be limited to 03 years with the option of this being extended should the project leadership team deem this to be necessary. The aim of the leadership team is to make the project self-funding and self-supporting.

Mr. Felix Stephen (Advisory Board member) from Australia was also present at the meeting. The other participants of this meeting included The Secretary to the Uva province Governor, other Governmental Officials, Principals and Teachers of disabled units of schools.

A special discussion with Dr. (Mrs.) Kumudini Cooray and Dr. Pushpakumara Weerakoon at the *Child Guidance Clinic* of Diyatalawa Base Hospital was held on 31st March, 2012. Mr. Milton Perera attended the meeting on behalf of the VACD. The contribution made by Dr. (Mrs.) Kumudini Cooray and her staff for the advancement of the children with disabilities is truly praiseworthy in many aspects. They volunteered to devote the 2nd and 4th week of every month for these children and they will be carrying out full medical checkups on '05 children a day' basis and each child will be provided with a Medical Record book.

Thus far the children who have had medical checkups are as follows;

April 25 th	-	05 Children (Sir Razeek Fareed Muslim Vidyalaya)
		01 Child (Rahula Vidyalaya)
May 09 th	-	04 Children (Dharmashoka MV)
May 23 rd	-	05 Children - do-
June 06 th	-	04 Children -do-
		01 Child Sudharshi Vidyalaya

We have already arranged 05 Children from St. Joseph's College to attend the clinic on June 27th, and are also planning to do an evaluation of this medical program in consultation with Dr. (Mrs.) Cooray to ascertain what further support or needs must be provided by VACD or well wishers to assist children with special requirements.

Our second committee meeting was held on 31st March, 2012, at St. Joseph's College, Bandarawela. This meeting was especially called to discuss the proposed *Sinhala & Tamil New Year Festival* for the children with disabilities and their families on 21st April, 2012 at St. Joseph's College premises.

In this meeting we nominated 07 new volunteers to the project working committee.

The meeting ended with an agreement to share various responsibilities among the committee members for the Festival celebrations.

21st April, 2012 was certainly a day of joy for all of us. The *Sinhala & Tamil New Year Festival* was held under the distinguished patronage of Dr. Pushpakumara Perera (MP for Bandarawela), Col.R.M. Ratnayaka (Commanding Officer- SL Army Volunteers Training Unit, Diyatalawa). His staff

provided an outstanding service towards the success of this Festival by handling ground arrangements, lunch & refreshments.

Some of our committee members also supplied Kiribath (milk rice) and other sweets. Mr. H.N.B. Dissanayaka (Auditor) Contributed Rs.10,000/- towards gifts for the children. Mrs. Damayanthi Munasinghe offered clothes for every participating child. Mr. Felix Stephen and his family (Australia) sent school items to be distributed among these children.

The festival program included 10 games for the participating children and 01 item each for the parents and their family members. Volunteers from Sunera Foundation gave their fullest support to ensure the success of this program.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

1. We are arranging to form a Parents Organization at Dharmashoka Vidyalaya in mid July, which will be followed by leadership and teamwork training.
2. We are seeking a voluntary teacher for the Children with disabilities Unit of Sir Razik Fareed Muslim Vidyalaya. (After discussing the traveling expenses of the teacher, it was agreed that the school would pay Rs.1000/- from the school welfare society, the parents would pay Rs. 1000/- and VACD would contribute Rs.1000/-).
3. We have already commenced a 'Birthday Greeting' program for children with disabilities which is highly appreciated by their parents.
4. Mrs. Damayanthi Munasinghe and her friend are committed to provide/construct a toilet (with special facilities) for one of our children at Makul Ella.

Given below is the list of children with disabilities registered with VACD to date.

SCHOOL	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
St. Josheph's College	14	03	17
Dharmashoka Vidyalaya	06	07	13
Sir Razeek Fareed Muslim V.	02	03	05
Sudharmananda Vidyalaya	-	01	01
Rahula Vidyalaya	01	-	01
Sudhrashi (Deaf & Blind)	01	-	01
Konthahela Vidyalaya	01	-	01
Vocational Training	01	01	02
Sunera Foundation	01	04	05
Home Stay	04	04	08

Total Number of registered - 54

Class Room refurbishment:

The department of education Bandarawela has been provided with Sri Lanka Rupees 250,000 (around A\$ 2,100) by the education fund of the provincial governor's office and these funds have been allocated to refurbish/modify the class room for children with disabilities at St Joseph's College, Bandarawela. A full report on progress being made in this respect will be shared shortly.

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