

Akany Avoko Newsletter 2005



2004 Overview

Welcome to the (much delayed!!) Akany Avoko Newsletter, 2005. You will all be pleased to know that life at Akany Avoko continues to be as industrious, vibrant, and (definitely) as hectic as ever. Unfortunately the busy daily life of the centre continually eats into the time that we have to put together updates such as these. Ironically, we are often so busy initiating projects, making use of your donations, and planning for the future of Akany Avoko that it is you – the friends who make everything possible who are the last to be informed about what your generosity has meant to the lives of the children here.

For Madagascar as a whole, 2004 certainly had its ups and downs. On the positive side, the reforms of President Ravalomanana began to take effect, with the road network and thus internal trade improving by the day, and the new Malagasy Anti-Corruption Commission beginning the long journey towards a more honest, open and fair political and economic environment for the people of Madagascar. On the other hand 2004 was a year of even greater hardship for ordinary people with cyclones Frank, Gafilo and Elita destroying many houses, businesses, public buildings and crops in coastal regions of the country and even venturing inland as far as the high plateau (where we are located) to rip off roofs, tear down trees and disrupt daily life (Akany Avoko suffered from damaged buildings and the loss of a solar water heater but fortunately no injuries).

Even more damaging than these natural disasters was the rapid devaluation of the Malagasy Ariary, with the local currency at one point halving in value against foreign currencies. This meant that all imported goods such as petrol, oil and, critically, rice rocketed to prices beyond the means of already struggling Malagasy families. At the time of writing the Malagasy Ariary is still at only 55% of its 2003 value against the British Pound. At last the new harvest of rice is reducing the queues that have been snaking for hundreds of yards outside rice stalls. But in general the cost of daily essentials is still higher than ever. These financial problems have only served to exacerbate pre-existing social issues such as under nourishment and inadequate medical care amongst the majority of Malagasy people. Akany Avoko has felt the knock-on effect of this crisis as more and more families are unable to afford to care for their children. During the last year, the number of children living at Akany Avoko has increased by one third to 150 (and still rising!!) this has not been helped by the current adoption situation in Madagascar where an extreme tightening of the rules and subsequent freeze on adoptions (targeted at preventing trafficking children) has meant that getting orphaned children adopted is nearly impossible. Fortunately the strength of foreign currencies against the Malagasy Ariary has meant that your donations in foreign currency have been more important than ever in providing shelter, food, education and care for the children here. Despite the increase in prices, one pound, dollar, or Euro goes much further at the present time in Madagascar than it did in 2003.

Thanks to your generosity, despite this economic chaos, Akany Avoko has been able to continue to care for its children, improve its financial footing and plan for their futures. As well as the many positive work-related events that took place at Akany Avoko throughout 2004 (which I'll talk more about later), the staff and children of the centre were blessed with many happy events.

The 9th of March 2004 saw the arrival of a beautiful baby daughter (Andrianina) for Hanta (our Childcare Centre Manager) and Steve Ernst (and ex-volunteer at Akany Avoko). Close on Andrianina's tail came the birth of the (equally beautiful!!) baby Amelie to Irenée Rajaona-Horne (AA's Project Development Manager, and author of many previous AA newsletters) and her husband Tsiry on the 27th of May. Amelie has recently celebrated her first birthday and is doing all she can to develop her toddling skills to the same level as Andrianina's. Both children have grown more beautiful and intelligent by the day and are in high demand for cuddles and games amongst Akany Avoko's numerous residents.



Amelie (left) & Andrianina

Felicité (one of the young people living and working at Akany Avoko's Halfway Home) and her boyfriend Avotra (also an Akany Avoko ex-resident) were married later in 2004 and enjoyed a beautiful reception (along with 140 mandatory guests!) at Akany Avoko.

Naomy, (the previous manager of Akany Avoko's Halfway Home) returned to a rapturous reception, from a year working in Wales with the Penrhys partnership community project. As well as having improved her English (and Welsh!) enormously, Naomy was able to learn many new skills in helping to run the welsh centre and had also in return offered much of her own experience in working with underprivileged children in Madagascar. In returning to Madagascar she was replaced in Penrhys by another bright, English speaking resident of Akany Avoko. Fabie travelled out to Wales in Autumn 2004 and will be spending a year, working with and living amongst the Penrhys community, whilst improving her English and dramatically increasing her collection of warm clothes!!

Extremely premature, abandoned by her mother, and severely ill, baby Lovaniaina's prospects were not at all good when she arrived at Akany Avoko. Thankfully, after incredible generosity from numerous donors (including many of you reading this newsletter), Akany Avoko was able to meet the costs of the specially enriched baby food and medical treatment necessary to save her life. Lovanaina, whilst still having to visit the hospital regularly, has been living with the family of a staff member of Akany Avoko for over six months now and is a much stronger and happier baby with a future to look forward to. We would like to thank the individuals, schools (particularly LGGS), offices and groups of friends who joined together to give her a chance.



Baby Lovaniaina

2004 also saw the retirement of Hardy Wilkinson, who, alongside her husband Steve has been the Director and driving force of Akany Avoko for the best part of 20 years. During this period it would be nearly impossible to count the number of children for whom she has cared, educated and been a mother. Steve has stepped into her shoes as Director of Akany Avoko, accompanied by Nina and Naomy as his very able deputy managers. Whilst continuing to support the centre's management team, Hardy is busy dedicating her time to training new social workers and child-carers in Antananarivo. That is, of course, when her beautiful new granddaughter Amelie will let Granny out of her sight!!!



Hardy, Steve & Amelie

It strikes me when looking back on this list of happy events at Akany Avoko in 2004, how many of them are related to new-born babies. The arrival of a child at Akany Avoko, whether privileged or underprivileged, well cared for or neglected, loved or unloved by its family, is always a joy to those of us who have the chance to live with them. The dire poverty that faces most Malagasy families means that the arrival of new abandoned babies at Akany Avoko is unlikely to change. Since Lovaniaina's arrival, at least six newborn or young babies have arrived at Akany Avoko's childcare centre, many with similar medical and nutritional problems. Your continuing support is more important than ever to secure brighter futures for them.



Our childcare centre now cares for 50 children!

Life at Akany Avoko in 2004

Day to day life at Akany Avoko was busier than ever during 2004, it goes without saying that taking care of the feeding, education and health of 150+ children is a full time job in itself. However the competence and increasing confidence of the Malagasy staff in running the centre combined with the generosity of international donors and volunteers in time, expertise and of course money, allowed 2004 to be a year of development for the centre as well as consolidation.

In early 2004, English volunteer Emma Rigby arrived at Akany Avoko and using expertise gained from working with numerous charities, she managed a Review of the goals, management structure, and child care processes & procedures of the centre. Using her recommendations and input from the staff a number of initiatives to improve the efficacy and organisation of the home have been put in place, all with the primary goal of ensuring that the children who live here receive the best possible care available.

The future of young adults leaving Akany Avoko has always been one of our greatest concerns here. Jennifer Kavanagh, who arrived last March, spent 2 months setting up a micro-credit scheme offering small loans to co-operatives of young and/or impoverished people with which to set up small business. Numerous Akany Avoko residents seized the opportunity to begin businesses as varied as yoghurt making, hairdressing, needlework and bakery. Ongoing advice and support is provided by M. Josoa and Mme Kajy, both staff members at Akany Avoko, who are being funded by a grant from the Sewell Trust to give these new businesses every chance of success.

When younger members of the Akany Avoko community wish to move on and start their adult lives, the lack of accommodation or family land on which to build a house is often a bar. Renting a house or room is a short-term solution but rent claims an enormous part of their small income and offers them no opportunity to plan for their future. Without any property upon which to secure loans, people like this across Madagascar face a future without any opportunity to own a home or to pass one on to their children. In co-operation with a Franco- Malagasy charity (ENDA) and the Glass-House Trust, "Project Habitat"



23 Akany Avoko graduates and staff sign land ownership papers.

has been initiated to help these young people move on and build for their future. A donation from the Glass-House Trust was used to purchase some land locally and "ENDA" will guarantee small loans to cover building materials and labour, as well as providing support and expertise whilst members of the project build their homes. Participants in the project have already been paying monthly instalments into the programme for over a year now and the first homes should start to go up within the next month. We hope that within a year a community of at least twenty homes will have been set up. Additional funding from the Kreitman Foundation will also allow us to provide shared facilities (toilets, showers, wash basins and a children's playground etc) on the site.

Our efforts to help provide for the future of children living at Akany Avoko have also been given a great boost by two donations from friends in the UK. Firstly the English Speaking Union amassed nearly 200 sewing machines which were sent to Akany Avoko to distribute to needy charities and individuals. This donation has allowed the centre, not only to generate income through making bed linen, table cloths, clothes etc, but to train the children living here in extremely valuable job-skills and finally to allow young people leaving Akany Avoko to earn a living using one of the donated sewing machines in their own home.



The second significant donation was of all the computers, printers, monitors, keyboards and mice necessary to set up a computer training centre for the children of Akany Avoko. As with the rest of the world, Information Technology skills are becoming more and more critical to securing well-paid, reliable work. Wenselydale and Swaledale Monthly Meeting have thus provided us with the opportunity to give the children of Akany Avoko a head start in the employment market when they grow older. In addition to improving their life-skills, these computers will enable the children to stay in touch with their sponsors by email, will help with their French and English studies through the use of language-teaching applications, and will also help those children studying for A/Levels and degrees to present their work professionally. This donation of computer equipment is also extremely timely as a combination of power-cuts, lightning strikes and computer viruses we have not had a working computer at Akany Avoko for most of the past year.



In June we celebrated the anniversary of our School's Linking project. Many of Akany Avoko's children have been corresponding with children of the Lancaster Girls Grammar School for several years, sharing information about history, culture, children's rights and, of course, pop music and handsome actors. On the anniversary of the exact date that the link began, and at the exact same time of day, both the Lancaster Girl's Grammar and Akany Avoko began parties celebrating one another's culture, with our celebration including tea and scones, traditional English party games and flag making. Akany Avoko is lucky enough to enjoy similar relationships with British and American schools, ensuring that our children's horizons are broadened and that they continue enjoy the spirit of international friendship that all of our sponsors and supporters bring to Akany Avoko.



The end of the academic year saw a very positive number of Akany Avoko's children passing their CEPE (senior school qualification), BEPC (equivalent to British GCSE's) and BAC (equivalent to British A/Level) exams. Given that many of the children concerned had received little or no schooling prior to arrival at the centre our teaching staff felt justifiably proud. Other Akany Avoko graduates starting out in the world included Lolona who spent several months on placement catering at a classy French restaurant, Rahely who has found a well paid job at an American owned tree nursery and Zo who continues to work as an educator for a major Malagasy AIDS prevention charity.

On the vocational side, and with the help of Espoir de Madagascar and the Whitbreads we initiated a chicken-rearing project where girls from the centre are trained in how to care for and breed chickens. The eggs are then used to feed the children and provide a supplementary income for the home. In addition to this, throughout 2004 Akany Avoko continued to provide training in craft production, paper-making, screen-printing, metalwork, and academic subjects including French, Maths, Malagasy and English (thanks to an English Speaking Union grant to pay for the wages of our English teacher, Ony).

It wasn't only the children who were hard at work studying, donations from QPSW also allowed us to send key members of staff on training to enhance all the skills needed to run Akany Avoko as efficiently, considerately and sympathetically as possible. These subjects ranged from childcare, first aid and accountancy to bee-keeping!

June/July saw the arrival of 2 groups of young people from the organisation "World Challenge" who delighted the children, not only through their friendship, European good looks and clothes but also in building a meeting and picnic area for the halfway home and the families of visiting children and an exceedingly popular ping-pong table.

Winter also brings the long school holidays so several bus loads of Akany Avoko children headed off to the east coast to experience (for the first time in many cases) the beautiful beaches, palm trees and coastal hospitality that bring many foreign tourists to their country. Whilst the food, education, care and security you provide is obviously the number one priority for the centre, watching children from such deprived, traumatic and painful backgrounds giggle and play in the sand whilst others begin to learn to swim in the warm sea is the sort of experience we would love for every one of Akany Avoko's supporters to have for themselves. Thank you.



Summer holidays: Heritiana & Sitraka

Later in the year two of Akany Avoko's main fundraisers (Irene Rajaona-Horne and Jan Kirby) were lucky enough to meet up with Akany Avoko's tirelessly enthusiastic and caring patron, Joanna Lumley at the Cheltenham literary festival. After much correspondence it was a real experience for them to meet up at last and a copy of Joanna's autobiography now adorns a shelf of the Akany Avoko library.



Finally, Christmas was an exceedingly happy one at Akany Avoko with a Gala dinner for the children and friends of Akany Avoko the week before Christmas (we had to make tables and stools especially), the appearance in a nativity show at the local church of many of our children and finally a lavish Christmas day meal (thanks again to Akany Avoko's good friends John and Rusty Whitbread).



All that left just a wild biscuit and cocoa-fuelled New Year's Eve dance-athon to see out 2004 in the best way possible.

In summarising life at Akany Avoko in 2004 I would like to make one final comment. This report of course stresses the many positive and happy events that took place during the year (and doesn't mention many others - trips to the zoo, fancy dress parties, dance lessons, new clothes, books, films, all things that whilst not costing much are a critical and deserved part of any child's life). However it is important to remember that as supporters of the home you are not just providing these highlights but have more importantly been responsible for giving our 150 children a safe, caring, educational and secure environment often for the first time in their lives. So to each of you whose donations were used for the "everyday" activities of feeding, clothing, educating and housing please don't forget how important you are to us and how grateful we are for what you continue to do for the children every day. Living here for eighteen months has offered me an opportunity to see first hand the fundamental difference that you make and the joy that you bring.

Simon Kirby, May 2005, Akany Avoko. (With a small baby-juggling hand from Irene)

Sponsorship

An enormous thank you to every one of you who continues to sponsor a child (or children) here at Akany Avoko. In addition to the fundamental practical support you offer them, the knowing someone so far away is thinking of them is enormous. Your photos, letters, cards and of course the Christmas and birthday presents that your sponsorship provides make a huge difference to their lives and this is evident in the numerous enquiries as to the well-being of the children's sponsors and their families that visitors to the centre from Europe, America or the UK are besieged with on arrival. Unfortunately the hectic nature of the centre and the ever increasing number of children means that we as staff cannot keep you anywhere near as up to date on the individual children's lives as we'd like to. Many of them have no experience of writing a letter (even in Malagasy) so our bi-lingual staff make every effort they can to help children to write letters and to translate and send them.

The influx of new children in late 2004 and early 2005 means that more children than ever are in need of sponsorship.

If you would like to sponsor a child please contact us at
akany.avoko@malagasy.com
horne@wanadoo.mg

We now
care for
more than
150
children.
Half of
them still
need a
sponsor.



Volunteers

As in previous years visiting international volunteers at Akany Avoko have done an enormous amount improve the lives of the children and provide the hands on care, attention, fun and nappy changing skills that every child deserves. Whether staying for a fortnight, a month, six months or more every volunteer leaves a lasting impression on the lives of so many of the centre's children who, often deprived of a family, crave love and affection more than anything else.

So thank you, in no particular order to all of you who taught, held hands, changed nappies, warmed bottles, put plasters on grazes, read stories, sang, danced, played, built or repaired things, organised parties, cooked, wore fancy dress, or just hugged in 2004:

Sigrun, Billé, Sophie Tunnacliffe, Jennifer Kavanagh, Kim & Helen, Maddie & Jon, Manon Wyn Jones, Emma Rigby, Valeria, Rebecca & Daisy, World Challenge (to list you all by name would occupy the whole newsletter!!), Maud (!!! xxx), Ken & Lorna (+gang), Mary, Vicki & Sandra, Rahel, Anne-Marie, Rebecca...

I can personally guarantee that every one of you is remembered (and incessantly asked about!) by the children of Akany Avoko.

Plans for 2005

Well, thanks to the lateness of this newsletter much of the following is already underway! but below is a list of some of the projects to improve the lives of the children and the future of the centre that will begin alongside our ongoing education and care activities:

- Building phase of the "Habitat" self build project with over 20 Akany Avoko residents building their own houses on their own land to secure their future and that of their families.
- Electrical, plumbing, and building repairs for all accommodation blocks
- A Fire safety re-fit of accommodation blocks including extinguishers, fire blankets, fire escapes and fire safety training for staff and children
- The building of four new classrooms to free up accommodation for new arrivals at the home and to improve the quality of education the children receive.
- Completion of the IT training centre
- The launch of "Malagasy" a new range of fairly-traded chocolate, coffee, tea and spices sold in support of Akany Avoko and other projects aimed at eliminating rural poverty in Madagascar. Arriving in UK shops in late 2005

If you would like to contribute to any of the above then as ever any donation big or small is very welcome! And there are worse ways of helping than guzzling a chocolate bar!!

Thanks to:

Finally, a big thank you to all of you who contributed any amount of money to the centre during 2004. As much of a cliché as it might sound, the phrase "every little helps" is 100% true at Akany Avoko. Every penny you give goes directly to pay for the care, food, medicine, clothes, building maintenance, education, power, water, and entertainment of children who are finally beginning to get the kind of childhood they deserve. We can't possibly hope to list every person or organisation who offered us their time or money (or indeed both!!) in 2004, but here is a list of just some of them:

Theresa Haine & Money for Madagascar; Patricia Kreitman & the Kreitman Foundation; The Glasshouse Trust; The American Presbyterian Church Outreach Foundation; Matt Greenall; All who contributed to the Lovaniana appeal (over £2000 raised); Alan Quilley and the Wensleydale & Swaledale Monthly Meeting; Diane Partridge (who is a much missed, tireless and fantastic friend to Akany Avoko; The English Speaking Union; World Challenge; Rusty & John Whitbread (and friends); Espoir de Madagascar; Linda Price (who ran the Great North Run for Akany Avoko!); The British Embassy, Antananarivo; SIT; Peace Corps; Judith & Rainbow Tours; ZATours; Priori; Jan Kirby for her tireless work in translating the generosity of our foreign donors into money over here in Madagascar; Annie de Meij ; The staff and children of Lancaster Girls Grammar, Dallas Rd School & All Saints Primary; Duke Street Chapel; Emmanuel Baptist Church, Dudley; Holy Trinity Church, Amberley; Our patron Joanna Lumley.