

DRAGONS AND A PLATTER WITH MASH

By: Jennifer Coburn, Rotary Club of Mont Albert & Surrey Hills

The “Brenda Books” story is one so often heard in Rotary circles – it all starts with a personal connection.

Millions of children suffer from HIV / AIDS in South Africa and are living in HIV affected families and communities throughout the country. The extent of the crisis is such that the concept of “child headed households” where no adults have survived, is becoming more common. The Rotary Club of Grahamstown Sunset had a small project to present all Year 1 Primary School children in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape Province and the surrounding rural areas with their **own** copy of the “Brenda Book” which can read to their families in order to educate people on living with HIV / AIDS. The Brenda Book, as it is known, is a true story about a young girl – Brenda – who has HIV which is pictorially and verbally represented as a **dragon in her blood**. The book is printed in eleven African languages and is well received in the local South African community.

Following a chance meeting with Debbie Smuts of Grahamstown, South Africa at the International Convention in Copenhagen, this story began. With the dream to grow this project into a larger Matching Grant opportunity, I promoted this project to my club – Mont Albert & Surrey Hills and then onto other clubs. Together with the support of Districts 9810, 9710 and 9320 with District Designated Fund contributions and a generous philanthropic trust, the small contribution of \$US750 originally envisaged to assist the Rotary Club of Grahamstown Sunset, this grew to an amazing project totalling over \$US32,500.

With the final report wrapping up the project shared with all partners in the project through a short newsletter, the success of this project was obvious to see through the extensive distribution of books. Some 7540 books were purchased and distributed to children and it is hoped that by placing the booklet in as many disadvantaged homes in the community as possible that significant progress will be made in dispelling the misconceptions and stigmas attached to HIV / AIDS.

Further, it is hoped that the presence of the booklet in thousands of homes will encourage families to read, thereby enhancing literacy.

As we wrap up this project and I reflect on the positive outcomes from my chance meeting with Debbie Smuts, this response to the final newsletter from her husband – PP Izak Smuts says it all:

“Thanks again for the report, and for motivating such extensive participation – I am convinced that this project touched more lives than any other I’ve been involved in over 22 years in Rotary.”

Coincidentally, Izak had been a Group Study Exchange Team Leader to District 9810 and I knew him – the Rotary family is indeed a small one.