

Africa..... The very name conjures up, at least for me, stories of intrepid explorers, visions of lions and elephants, antelopes and Cape Buffalo, mountains, thick bush, and beautiful sunrises. Each time we visit South Africa it seems that we see many of these things and so much more. That, along with a number of very good friends in South Africa, is a big part of what keeps drawing us back. For a hunter or anyone who enjoys the outdoors and nature, South Africa is a special place. During April of 2013 we were privileged to make our third safari there. Each trip it seems is better than the last.

When we began planning this hunting safari in early 2012 we contacted our outfitter in South Africa to ask them for assistance in identifying schools near where I would hunt that were underprivileged. Alice and I agreed that we would work through the Safari Club International "Blue Bag" program to provide what help we could and take supplies to schools. After a few weeks of research on their part our outfitter, Somerby Safaris, identified two schools in the Free State province located in the central part of S.A.. The Soba Farm School and the Solferino Farm School near the town of Kestel were chosen. Soba has 60-100 learners on any given day and Solferino has 25-30. Both are called farm schools because they are located on land that is provided by a local farmer and teach the children of the workers on the farm as well as other children from the surrounding area. Soba Farm School has two rooms which combined are approximately 20 foot wide and 40 foot long. The day we visited there were 88 learners in that space along with teachers and some administrators who had shown up for the day. Needless to say, there was not a lot of extra space. Solferino has one room measuring approximately 15 by 25 foot and about 30 learners.

Our major endeavors were to provide a carpet, a propane stove and shelving for each school. The carpet is needed to help keep the classrooms a bit warmer. One doesn't think of Africa as being cold. However, in the central part of South Africa winter morning temperatures often fall into the upper 20's to low 30's. The schools are not heated and the floors were bare so a carpet is a huge advantage especially to children who do not have good quality cold weather clothing. The schools provide a lunch of beans and rice cooked on a propane stove much like one would take on a camping trip. Feeding 25-100 children with one small stove, as you might expect is a real challenge. And, as amazing as it sounds neither school had any shelving so books, stationery and other supplies were stored in piles on the floor. Not only was it a challenge to find the right item in the right pile, the piles took up valuable floor space needed for children to learn.

Many people from our town of Lapeer, our church, friends and folks from surrounding towns, as well as individuals and churches from around the Presbytery of Lake Huron contributed money and supplies. A couple of local dentists provided toothbrushes and toothpaste. Office Depot provided some school supplies and backpacks. Several people contributed "Beanie Babies stuffed toys.

Ansa, who works for Somerby Safaris, took the lead in locating local suppliers in South Africa to get the stoves ordered, the carpet installed and the shelves built and delivered. Without her tremendous effort this project simply would not have been possible and we are sincerely thankful for her hard work and perseverance. She spent a lot of extra time in getting it all arranged.

It is often said "God works in mysterious ways". In attempting to locate the shelving that was needed for the schools cost quickly became a factor. Metal shelving that was available through the equivalent of our Home Depot was very expensive and for the number of units we needed unattainable. However, the folks at Somerby knew of a fellow who had contracted polio as a young boy. He was told that he would not live to see his teens and that he would never walk. Well, he proved everyone wrong and is now in his 40's and has a nice family. Despite his great attitude and his intense will, walking with leg braces is still very difficult for him. As a result of this limitation he works odd jobs and money is always tight. He agreed to build the shelves while his wife and children stained and varnished them. The schools got the shelves they needed, he and his family earned some much needed money and we were able to cover the cost with the available funding.

We wanted to visit each school and see the final results as well as meet those who were helped and those who helped make it possible. Since we were going to visit the schools we wanted to take something for each child. Made possible by the donations of so many organizations and individuals each child received a toothbrush, toothpaste, pens, pencils, a yo-yo and a "Beanie Baby" stuffed toy. Extra school supplies like pencil sharpeners and crayons as well as soccer balls and Frisbees were also taken to each school. Alice made maps from fabric that show the world on one side and the U.S. on the other. Maps are in short supply and many of the teachers and learners were not exactly where we were from or where the U.S. is located compared to where they live.

On the day of the actual visits to the schools I suspect the excitement was running high for the learners and teachers; it was certainly high for Alice, Ansa and me! The schools knew that we were coming for a visit but they thought we were just there to see the stoves, carpets and shelves and did not know that we were bringing additional items. It was like an unexpected Christmas Day for them. Smiles were everywhere and the delight was palpable. It is recorded in the Book of Acts Chapter 20 verse 35 "It is more blessed to give than to receive". That statement was never more true than in seeing the looks of gratitude on the children's faces.

Even on this early autumn day it was cool and overcast. Children and teachers were dressed in coats, sweatshirts or whatever they had to keep them warm. The children sang songs in their native language (Sotho pronounced Sutu) and performed native dances for us. What a great thrill! We also received hand made cards from some of the children who had cut them from paper, hand

decorated and written personal notes in for us. These cards are now prized possessions. Keep in mind that for these teachers and students English is a third language. Their primary languages are Sotho and Afrikaans.

One of the teachers at Soba Farm School wrote the following poem which was recited for us by a sixth grade learner.

**There they Come...**

**One day when I least expected,**

**There they come.**

**One day when I was expecting the worst,**

**There they come,**

**To protect me from the cold winters,**

**The savior from the United States.**

**There they come with warmth,**

**There they come.**

**When I was expecting the cold winter days,**

**To be my master for the whole season,**

**There they come.**

**To give me and my friends the protection.**

**Protection from the cruel season,**

**The season that makes me want to run away,**

**To where I could find heat and warmth.**

**Running away from South Africa to another country,**

**But there they come**

**To keep me away from my misery.**

**Thank you United States**

**You made us proud,**

**You brought happiness into our lives,**

**You gave us the reason to come to school,**

**We love you United States**

**We are proud of you,**

**Thank you....**

The students at Solferino school wrote us the following note:

***From the depth of our hearts we wish you showers of God's blessings. We are really lost for words but know that we are really grateful. To us this is history in the making. Our records will prove that in 2013 we received such wonderful resources from you. God has a way of answering prayers..... ours were answered through you. We hope that this companionship will not end today but will carry on as years go by. Every time you are in South Africa feel free to visit our small school. You will always be welcome here at Solferino Farm School. Thank you very much.***

Their thank you were to each and every person who donated or helped. They and we understand that it was the donors and helpers who made it possible, Alice and I along with the nice people at Somerby were simply the tools to make it happen.

For this trip the Flint Chapter of Safari Club International provided us with a "Blue Bag" to take supplies. Through this program hunters are encouraged to take a duffel of supplies for needy folks in the areas where they hunt. The bag that SCI gave us was pre-filled with not only school supplies but bandages, reading glasses, blood glucose meters, latex gloves and many other supplies that really didn't seem appropriate for elementary schools. Somerby assured us that we would find a good use for them. Sure enough, a nursing home for the elderly in Kestel which houses approximately 30 people was excited to receive these items. They get very limited funding and supplies such as these are in extremely short supply. They had a number of patients who

had their diabetes treated by estimating blood sugar levels. Several people had given up reading because of the lack of reading glasses. Despite the risk of infection latex gloves are almost non-existent. Yes, God does work in mysterious ways.

The thanks that we received from the children, teachers and staff at the schools along with the realization that some of the supplies would benefit those who are later in life was overwhelming and wonderful. Like an earlier "Blue Bag" trip we have made in 2011 we clearly saw that through helping people who need it so badly that we came away with far more than we gave.

Without doubt, it truly is more blessed to give than to receive.