

South African Study Tour



By Leanne O'Donnell, Solicitor, Middletons Lawyers

The vision and commitment of those working to empower developing communities in South Africa is inspirational to those who have witnessed it first hand.

On 3 July 2004, eight other Australians and I embarked on a two-week study tour to South Africa, ably led by the Oaktree Foundation's founder and Young Australian of the Year, Hugh Evans. The Oaktree Foundation (Oaktree) is a youth-driven aid organisation which seeks to empower developing communities through education in a way that is sustainable.

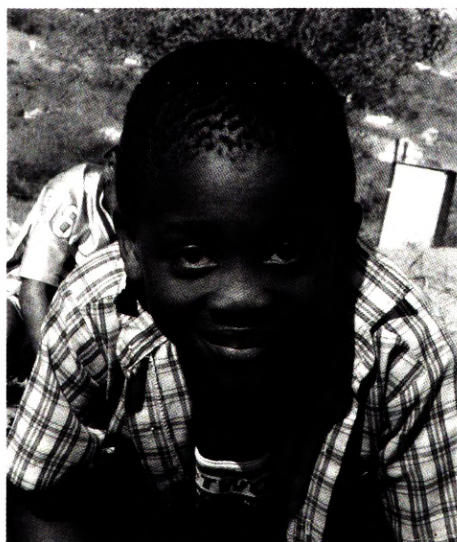
One of the highlights was visiting the site of Oaktree's pilot project, a community resource centre in the KwaNgcolosi valley in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The project will provide access to computers, books and a safe environment where students can do homework. This project is, however, about much more than constructing a building. The actual construction of the building is only phase one of the process in which the community will be supported over a six-year period. Each year the level of Oaktree's financial support will decrease while the community's financial support increases, culminating in a totally sustainable and community-run facility.

It is estimated that by 2010, HIV/AIDS will kill as many as seven million people in South Africa, leaving up to three million orphans in its wake. In KwaZulu-Natal, the matriculation failure rate is 65 per cent and university entrance qualification less than 5 per cent.

What is inspiring is the hope expressed by many of the people we met. Glenn Scott, Oaktree's pro bono accountant and I spoke on vision and goal-setting to a group of young unemployed people who

were participating in an empowerment course, coordinated by young people from World Changers Academy, one of Oaktree's potential partners in South Africa.

Glenn and I asked the group to share some of their visions with us. These visions included establishing a hotel for tourists coming to South Africa for the 2010 World Cup; training to be a teacher in community education; establishing a business selling South African products; and being a nurse and having a wonderful husband.



One of the young men shared with me his dream of becoming a journalist. He recently sent me a letter which he entitled "12 Signs of Hope", these signs included the following:



"Africa is a cradle of humanity. . . . We welcome people with warm hands despite race, gender and religion, which make us so unique.

". . . We have altruistic and patriotic people . . . like Dr Nelson Mandela, who inspired a lot of people especially the youth because he fought for us to have peace and freedom. He also taught us of forgiveness as he reconciled with those who oppressed him. . . . He said in his speech on 17/07/2004, . . . [that] his last wish is that the world could fight HIV & AIDS together.

"During the 2010 Soccer World Cup bid there were three presidents in one voice and one language. Dr FW De Klerk former president, D Nelson Mandela, first black president and M. Thabo Mbeki. . . They showed the true essence of us as Africans. How can I forget Archbishop Desmond Tutu because he was also there, it was a great foursome, I think that is why we won the Bid.

"We are a democratic country in South Africa. We've got both constitution and the bill of rights. After all the violence that had been going on for years, we are now one nation. I think each and every South African life is the best seller"

For further information about the Oaktree Foundation and how you can get involved, see <http://www.theoaktree.org/> or contact me on Leanne.O'Donnell@middletons.com.au or 9205 2113. ■

