

Tujatane - The Tongabezi Trust School. Initially founded as a pre-school with only 15 pupils, it is now a primary school with over 240 students.

The school was founded by Vanessa Parker in 1996. Vanessa Parker is the wife of Ben Parker, owner of the Tongabezi Lodge near the famous Victoria Falls.

We have spoken to Vanessa about the history and aims of Tujatane – and how we can support this project.

Genuss Touren: Vanessa, you founded the Tongabezi Trust School in 1996. Tell us a bit about the motives for opening up a school – and the first obstacles, you had to overcome.

Vanessa Parker: I went out to Zambia as a volunteer teacher with VSO (voluntary service overseas) and met Ben, my husband, whilst I was volunteering. I ended up with Ben at Tongabezi Lodge and wanted to do something to help the local community by supporting education. Tongabezi helped me set up the first classroom and we had 15 little preschool kids from the local community and employed a retired teacher. I had no idea the school would grow so big but due to the passion and drive from the community coupled with the need for an education for their children we managed to fundraise and every two years we had enough money to build another classroom. Slowly the school grew into what it is today. It has been hard to find really good teachers and hard to find the funds to cover the costs of the school. We now have almost 300 pupils and 30 members of staff.

Genuss Touren: What is the background of your pupils? Where are they coming from, how are their living conditions? If there wasn't Tujatane – would they have access to education/ schooling?

Vanessa Parker: The pupils all come from the local villages surrounding Tongabezi Lodge. Some walk for over an hour to get to school. They all walk to school. They all come from homes with no running water and mostly no electricity. They generally live in mud huts comprised of one or two rooms. Their kitchen is a fire outside. Their bathroom is a reed enclosure where they take a bucket of water to wash. Most of the parents have not completed their education and so we have started an evening adult education class for some of the parents who wish to get a primary level or secondary level education. A number of the parents are unemployed and struggle to supply even food for their children. We have a food programme at school (it costs just £6/month to feed a child) in order to give the pupils the nutrition they need to be able to focus in class. There is a local government school nearby where the children would otherwise go but it is very underfunded and class sizes are huge.

Genuss Touren: What are the aims of Tujatane? (Education, nutrition, health, etc.)?

Vanessa Parker: We aim to offer each child a chance to succeed in whatever their passion and talent is in.

We plan to have a good ICT department to ensure the pupils have a chance to learn on computers and explore on the internet. We also focus on co curricular activities and have art, music, dance, drama, chess, sports, girl empowerment, science, debate, beading clubs. We teach the children the importance of hygiene and on focusing on their education and try to persuade the girls to remain at school and not choose early marriage. We have recently set up a sewing club for some of the parents and also for the pupils to empower the community.

Genuss Touren: "Success-stories" – is there one student, you are particularly proud of?

Vanessa Parker: Arnold Pelekelo. He did his primary level at Tujatane. He did extremely well in his Grade 7 National exam and was offered a place at the top boys secondary school in Livingstone. We found a sponsor to continue to support him through secondary schooling in Livingstone. He did extremely well in his final Grade 12 National exams at the end of secondary level. A generous sponsor funded him through his PPL (private pilots licence) in Lusaka. This same sponsor funded him to do a commercial flying licence in USA. He completed this and came back to Zambia. He is now a pilot in Zambia flying for the Flying Doctors and is hoping eventually to join a commercial airline and fly all over the world. He inspires our pupils at Tujatane.

Another inspiration is Jane Ng'andu who also did her primary schooling with us at Tujatane and got top marks in her Grade 7 National exams, went on to secondary schooling (thanks to a sponsor) and again did very well in her Grade 12 National exams. She went on to study law (again thanks to sponsorship) and is now a fully qualified lawyer in Zambia.

Genuss Touren: How can we support Tujatane?

Vanessa Parker: Sponsoring a child is the best way to support us as this enables us to run the school and pay the teachers. Sponsorship commitment is £600/child/ year. We link the sponsor to a child and the child sends their sponsor a piece of work each term together with their report. The sponsor can watch the child develop as they go through school.

Sponsoring the food programme is another great way to support Tujatane. This costs just £6 per month or £72 per year.

Sponsoring a school outing as a one off donation is very helpful too. This generally costs around £150 per outing to cover transport, food and entry.

If guests are coming to visit Tongabezi Lodge they can check out our website and bring some supplies for our pupils.

Genuss Touren: Thank you very much for the interview!