

A little boy of about three years old looks at me like I'm the first person he has ever laid eyes on. He wants to touch my hair: a simple gesture of exploring but so significant to me when I think about my own son's insatiable curiosity. Who explores with these children? Who takes the time to sit down and discover life with them?

When I go down on my knees I am embraced, not by an HIV positive orphan, but by a child: A child in need of touch. These children need to be hugged, held and loved. Another big one on Doulos' needs list: time.

Emma van der Merwe looks quite at home trotting around her smallholding. The wind chills one to the bone on this wintery Wednesday afternoon, but in an atmosphere of love and acceptance such as the one at Doulos Ministries, the nippy weather doesn't stand a chance. Losing her own mother to the illness in 1996, Emma's calling was clear to her. She founded Doulos Ministries in 2003 in her own home. After a while she managed to raise the funds to convert the horse stable on their small holding into a crèche and care centre and put up a secure fence. Once that was done, raising funds became much easier.

"People don't want to donate to a cause that is run from someone's house," she says.

Today, 7 years later, she talks with endearment of the 27 kids who are literally living in her backyard and battling HIV/Aids. Of these children 90% are orphans, most of them losing their parents to HIV/Aids. The remaining 10% has a grandmother or a father who is either too old to take care of them or who works long hours. The kids find their way to Doulos through hospitals and child welfare. They are all HIV positive and all ill to terminally ill.

Three little bundles of joy lie in the nursery: born HIV positive. My colleague and I exchange glances as two new mothers. Who holds these babies? Who gets up for them at night? Who rubs their tiny little chests and gives them a baby massage after bath time? What chance do they have in life? Then the little girl starts crying. She is the 23rd baby taken away from one mother, who is in her fifties by now. Still infecting the world and bringing more HIV positive babies into this life. The little one weighed 1.5kgs upon arrival.

"The first problems we deal with when a newby arrives at Doulos are malnutrition and neglect in public hospitals. These children are not skinny because of the illness; they are skinny because they are hungry."

Emma continues to tell us the horror stories of cold porridge in hospital rooms where kids are reduced to mere skeletons simply because they are not being fed.

For these children that time however, is long forgotten. Five o'clock is dinner time at Doulos, so at four o'clock we find all of the five year olds hanging around in the lounge.

Emma looks at them like a proud grandmother would look at her grandchildren.

"These are my kids", she declares.

"It takes R70 000 a month to keep the centre open. The government was here a while ago to do an inspection. We have applied for a government subsidy, just to help pay salaries and overheads. People don't want to donate someone else's salary."

In this process, Doulos' documentation had to be resubmitted 5 times since last October.

"If we get support from the government, we will receive around R1500 per month per child. They said we must then expand to take in up to 40 children. That's fine by me," she says matter-of-factly.

"Woolworths supports us with food that hasn't been sold every Sunday. Dr. Soldin does all our bloodwork for free and Dr. Plitt takes care of the kids when they are ill. But we still need so much to take care of these kids."

The Bush administration funded ARVs for African countries. Since Obama took over, ARVs are for the account of Doulos.

"Protea Pharmacy gives them to us at cost."

I couldn't help wondering so I asked: How does she do it? How does she take care of these children, see them live with this cruel illness, battle it with all they have got and eventually die? How does she go about her day to day chores not thinking about it constantly? How does she go to bed without crying herself to sleep every night for these innocent little ones born with a death sentence?

"In the beginning, we lost 5 kids a week. Since Dr. Plitt started helping us in 2005, we only lose about one per year."

Dr. Plitt is a local medical doctor who takes care of the Doulos kids free of charge.

"But I don't know where it comes from", she says, "I just love taking care of sick people, I always have. Especially children"

Does she grieve for them?

"Yes, I do. Death is never expected," says Emma. "You're never prepared for it. I grieve for each one I lose and I bury them like a mother would her child. It's never easy."

When Jayne* was little she was administered a drip in a public hospital. Thanks to negligent care, the area on her head where the drip had been turned into a festering sore which had made skin grafts necessary. Jayne* has recovered since. Today the area on her head with no hair

serves as a reminder of what she has been through. Thanks to Doulos she is a smiling five year old who recently (as Emma tells us proudly) got up in church to proclaim: "The Lord is my Shepherd!"

Mary* was struggling at school until Emma noticed that she turned her head sideways when spoken to. It turned out that she was almost completely deaf. With the help of a benefactor, she was fitted a hearing aid in each ear. Today she is a straight A student. Emma shines with pride as she tells us of young Mary*. The luster is however lost as she continues her story. Mary* is on her last combination of drugs. If her current heart medication loses its effect, she will die.

"You can see the fear in her eyes when she gets ill. It is like she is waiting for it to happen. She comes to the house at bedtime and asks to stay with me," says Emma and her eyes shine as tears well in them.

"She wants to get into bed with me and I let her. What else can I do?"

*Children's names have been changed in order to protect their identity.