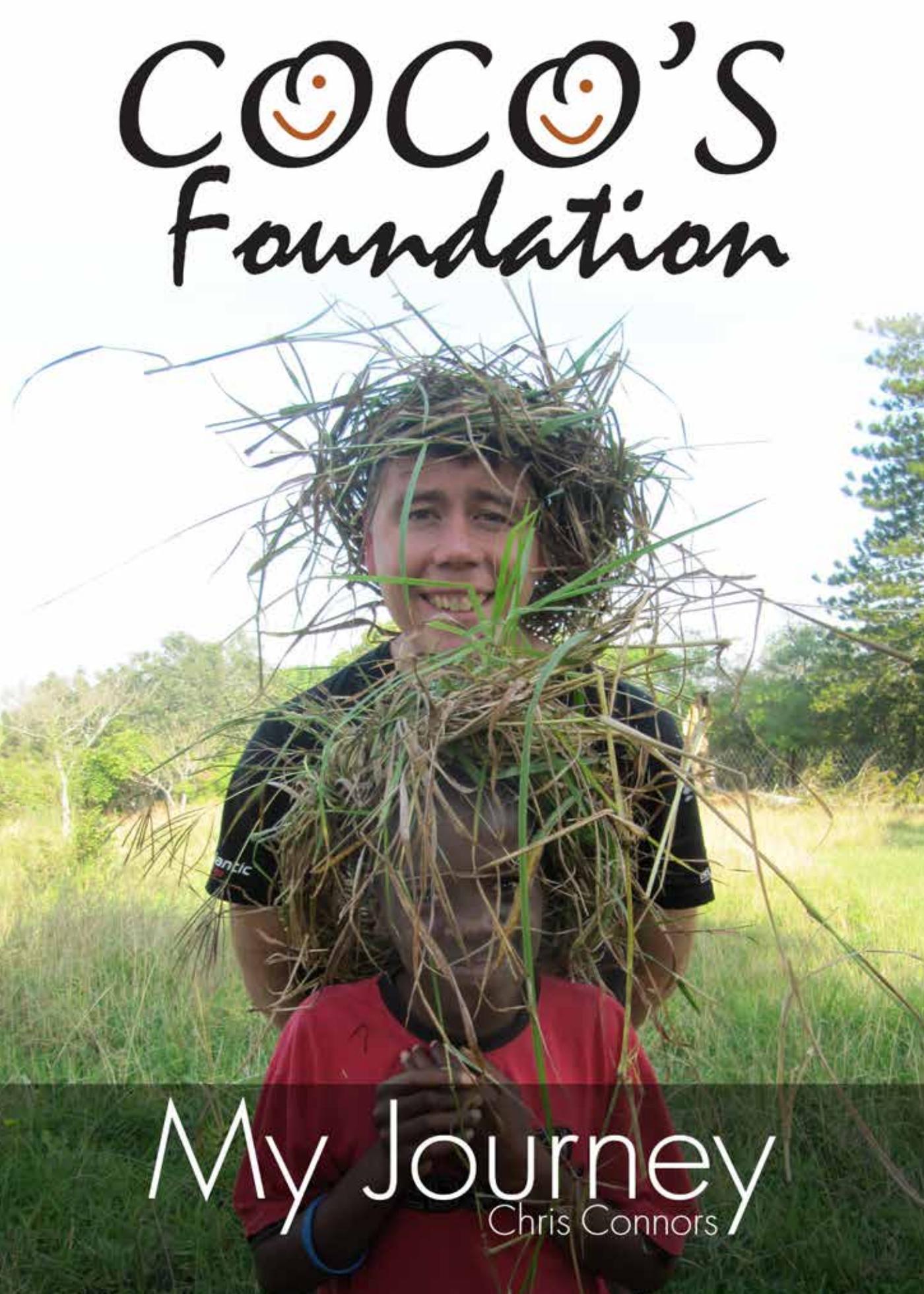


# COCO'S Foundation



My Journey  
Chris Connors

# Foreward

My goal is to strive to make the world a better place for young people - full of hope, happiness and opportunity - through choice .....

This could not have been possible without the help of many Friends and the Team that give money; those that we leave at home but that keep COCO'S Foundation going, the 'fuel' that allows us to go and play. The 'heartbeat' that facilitates life.

It's all about family. Sometimes in our busy life we forget those that are always there, those that love and support us - unconditionally. One day my six year old nephew, Tom, was wrestling with me in the garden and told me, in the direct and unsubtle way that only a child can:

'Uncle Chris, I really like you since you got back from Africa.'

The story you are about to experience will explain why Tom is a very perceptive young man.



# I have 3 stories to tell.....

## First Story

**H**aving been a hairdresser for 25 years, I am passionate about delivering a high quality service to each and every client that walks through our salon doors. This can only be achieved - I believe - by the team that works within COCO'S. They are 'the breath', the very life blood, that has inspired me to recognise my belief that 'anything is possible'.

Back in July of 2009, one of my young team members was having a bad day at work at my Billingshurst salon. When I enquired as to what was the matter, he told me that he enjoyed being a hairdresser and loved working with clients but that he also dreamed of working with children in Africa.

"Ok let's make it happen." I said with all the conviction of a man who has no idea what he is letting himself in for!.

"You can not just make it happen" Ed scoffed.

"Yes" I replied "You can."

"Yeah right! It's thousands of miles away and will cost hundreds of pounds"

He protested.

"Ed, anything is possible.!" I retorted convincingly.

"Yeah right!" His tone was as cynical as mine was convincing.

I looked at him, raised an eyebrow and felt the full force of his youthful potential staring back at me.... "Ok, " I challenged him, "Go away for a couple of weeks and then come back to me and let me know if you really want to do it or not."

Two weeks later, back at Billingshurst, Ed asked if he could have word. Little did I know that short conversation would be one that would change my life forever.

"Were you serious about what you said?" He enquired with some trepidation.

"Yes."

"Ok I would love to make it work." Said Ed - and so it began.....

The initial hurdle that needed to be overcome was finding an orphanage in Africa in need of our help. Where to start...! After spending many hours searching the internet with no real idea or concept of what it was we were seeking, it was proving to be extremely daunting, challenging and frustrating.

However, fortune was about to smile on us and fate was about to play her part. In the October of that year, Debs - Director of COCO'S Southwater and Trustee of the COCO'S Foundation - and I found ourselves at a large hairdressing conference in Birmingham with Paul Mitchell and Salon Success. That evening in the Bar we found ourselves standing next to none other than John Paul Deorio, the founder of the Paul Mitchell Systems.

Knowing that this was an ideal opportunity, we bit the bullet and asked him if he knew of anyone in Africa that could help us find an Orphanage. Incredibly, he told us that he did know such a man and that he would get his Personal Assistant to give us the information. True to his word, that very evening, I received an e-mail from Veronica who passed on to me the e-mail address of a man called Gordon from the international charity 'Food4Africa'.

Food4Africa feeds an incredible 17,0000 children every day throughout South Africa. This was to prove to be the perfect partnership.

Starting my life changing correspondence with a man I had never met, I gave my remit to Gordon. This was to ask him to find us somewhere that was in need of a building project, but that was also not in the proximity of a luxury hotel complex and certainly not close to a McDonalds.

After an agonising wait full of anticipation, Gordon came back to us a month later having found an orphanage with three much needed projects:

1. The building of a reservoir
2. The development of a 'half way house'
3. The construction of a community hall

After lengthy discussion with the eager team of young volunteers from our academy it was decided that we would build the half way house.



A half way house is sanctuary in which a child can stay in transition until they are ready to go into the orphanage. Here, in an environment in which they can experience safety for the first

time in a very long while, they are helped to recover in the arms of a house mother. This relatively short, generally three week long period, is the beginning of their journey to a new life.

Difficult decision made, we started the mammoth task of raising £10,000 for the Half way House.

The young team of Professional hairdressers along with Debs - more used to crimping than scrimping - were led admirably by Ed. Together they worked relentlessly and tirelessly with one, single-minded aim: to raise the money that was needed. This they continued to do until - on the 2nd May 2010 - we found ourselves strapped into our seats on a plane to Johannesburg, South Africa. As they stepped off that aeroplane the young team of dedicated professionals cheered with excitement, trepidation and, most importantly, in triumph. This was the furthest they had ever been away from their homes; their families; their comfort zones. Life for them was now about making dreams come true for other people. With this frame of mind, we caught our connecting flight to Durban.

The Half way house was an existing building that with our bare hands, and under the instruction of a small team of four builders, we renovated and extended over a period of two and a half weeks.



This is now a self-contained building situated in the corner plot of the orphanage where the sun shines in so brightly, creating hope and happiness each day. It is a simple building to the outside world, but in reality it is a place where a child, with no other hope in the world, can be loved nurtured and cared for by a House Mother 24 hours a day; seven days a week. Here they will sleep safely, eat and play and, most importantly, regain

the inner strength and self-belief they once had. Here they can start the journey to regain their childhood....

This building has separate bedrooms, a bathroom and a physio area to ensure every child's needs are met. This is a place that, at long last, they can call home and be part of a happy family. They will remain here until the day they can be integrated into the orphanage along with the other children.

Never question if you can help; you already have.

There are nineteen children in the Orphanage, all of which have HIV or AIDS. My naive understanding was, at that point, that all most of the nineteen Orphans must have contracted HIV or AIDS (and had been orphaned) because

it had been passed to them by their mothers who had themselves been infected. However, the cold, hard and crushingly cruel reality hits you when you are told that every child had, indeed, been born free of HIV. You then have to stop and think ‘How can this be?’. From that initial question a single, disturbing thought forces its way into your consciousness, which you, in turn, push away because it makes you feel so uncomfortable. That is until you can deny the thought no longer, because it is a simple, but horrifying, fact : ‘Yes, each child between the age of 2 and 6 has been raped’

The first time we entered the Orphanage the children ran up to the car with the biggest smiles you are ever likely to see. Immediately, all our young team members jumped out of the cars and started playing with the children. I stayed in the background a little, I wasn’t accustomed to being in the company of so many children. I live my life amongst adults and was surprised to find this experience a little scary; I was having an uncomfortable moment of realisation. Suddenly I was thinking to myself, ‘What have I done...!? I am going to be stuck here for the next three weeks with all these children.!’



With all these thoughts, that were tantamount to panic, crowding me I caught sight of a very young boy standing away, isolated from the group. I watched him slink silently around the corner of a building, tightly clutching his bottle; a bottle that contained a pipe sticking out the top with dust settled in the bottom. A victim of my curiosity, I decided to take a sneaky peak around the corner of the building and could see him sitting there, under a tree, in the middle of the lawn.... sobbing.

I moved down towards him and, as I did, he smacked his bottle hard upon the dry earth, sending dust out of the bottle like a fountain. As it did so I watched his little black face which was now covered in a fine film of powder with a single tear running down his cheek creating a little salty channel of mud. As I sat down next to him I instinctively wiped away his tears and then wondered in trepidation if I should be doing this; could I catch Aids..?

Undeterred, I cautiously asked him his name. ‘THABISO’ came the reply. ‘Come on Thabiso’ I ventured ‘I’m going to be here for the next 2 weeks and we are going to have FUN.’ All of this I said in the hope that he would stop crying. To my surprise, and relief, he dried his tears. Seizing the moment I took charge of the situation. ‘Come on let’s join the others’. I led the way in the march back up the hill and the next thing I felt was a tiny little black hand sliding, uninhibited, into mine. From that day forward he became my newest best friend.

He was there, every morning, outside my room having found my water bottle amongst the vast array of other water bottles. He would fill it up and hand it to me. A simple gesture with a huge message. However, I then had to empty the water bottle (without him seeing) and change the water for clear water.!

One day I moved 32 wheel barrows full of rubble. Little THABISO walked back and forth with me all day and, after I had dumped each load, he jumped in for the ride back down the hill with the biggest smile on his face to get the next barrow-full.

On one of those early evenings all the children came together to sing us a welcome. Their voices defied everything that their lives had hitherto denied them, their harmony so beautiful and so in tune; their melody so perfectly pitched – the effect breathtaking and humbling.



Around seven o'clock in the evening everything, and everybody, stopped what they were doing and a little girl walked in with a basket full of pills in containers. The children gathered around the baskets, opened the containers and, like children in a sweet shop, they emptied four or five pills out each, showed a 'Momma' (a mother that looked after the children) what they had in their hands and then they swallowed the pills – no fuss; no complaints. Jodie, one of our team members who was 17 and liked to 'party' a lot, asked the Mommas what the pills were for. Momma replied with a very stark, direct answer. The pills were to keep them alive..... This was the children's tragic daily routine.

Young Jodie's eyes started to brim with tears. That night was a very quiet one when our team retired to bed. The next day I found Jodie in tears on the mountain side. 'How could they be that happy and yet so ill?' she asked.

Dawn, the owner of the orphanage, asked if we would like to go to the local hospital to meet a two year old that was lucky to be starting her new home at the orphanage. We accepted, so the next day Ed and I went to the hospital and took with us armfuls of teddies for all the children in the children's ward.

As we walked in the smell was very pungent; the smell of decaying flesh. We were taken to a little cot and inside was a tiny child staring into space with his vacant eyes wide open. Ed spent some time with him showing him the little teddy we had brought. I looked down the ward and was immediately drawn to a figure lying in a bed and asked the nurse if we would be able to go over and meet the young boy, so still and clearly so ill. She agreed that we could but informed us that he had full blown AIDS. He was eleven years old and weighed just two stone. Ed, visibly moved, asked if it would be ok to bring him a teddy.

The Teddies were knitted for us from the ‘Knitting Nannies’ in the UK. One day whilst at work, the post arrived and there was a hand written envelope, which in this day and age always catches my eye. I placed the bills on the table and opened the letter. It was from a lady and I guess that she was in her late sixties as the writing resembled the careful script of my mum and dad. The lady introduced herself as Ruth and she explained that she had heard about the good work that we were doing to raise money for the orphanage. She asked if I would take some teddies out to the orphans that her and her friend hand knitted. I admit that my initial thought was ‘God, not more stuff to do!’

I picked the phone up and rang her up with the intention of thanking her for her lovely letter, but that I felt that it was not possible. Ruth answered the phone and I introduced myself. Before I had the chance to say a word she expressed her gratitude, ‘Oh Chris thank you for taking the teddies’. Determined not to take the teddies, I thought quickly on my feet and suggested that we meet first for a ‘chat’ . My rationale was that there was no way two old ladies would take the trouble to travel to meet with me. However, ‘Yes.’ Was the undeterred reply!.....

“Next Wednesday?” I suggested tentatively. “That would be lovely!” I placed the phoned down with the sinking realisation that the conversation had not gone to plan, but still believing that there is no way that they would turn up.

However, Wednesday arrived and I was busy in the office when I looked up to see two ladies of a certain age walking across the square carrying two, very full, black bin liners. Not giving it a second thought I carried on working until ten minutes later I heard a noise from the spiral staircase. I got up and looked out of the office door only to see the same.

Two old ladies struggling up the stairs. Then I remembered that letter. With a cold shiver running down my spine it all became clear . There was no way I was going to take these teddies all the way out to Africa.....

‘Hallo Ruth and Midred’ I said smiled feigning enthusiasm.

‘Hallo you must be Chris Connors’. Theirs, in contrast, was genuine.

‘Yes, I cannot believe my team made you struggle up these stairs’ .

‘That’s ok .’

‘Would you like a cup of tea.?’ I hadn’t forgotten my manners.

‘Yes please’ they both said gratefully.

‘Come and take a seat.’ I offered ‘Now, about these teddies?’

‘Oh yes thank you for offering to take them for us’

(I’m not I thought..!)

‘Well let’s have a look at them’ I said.

With that Ruth produced these exquisitely beautiful, hand-knitted teddies. However, call me mean and cruel, but the thought of transporting a load of teddies to Africa - well...forget it..!

My mind was racing - I knew I had to come up with a way of getting out of this and I had to do it quickly. Suddenly I came up with the perfect solution: order a huge amount and they will not be able to knit that many!

'Can you manage a hundred?' I ventured. 'Oh that's a lot!' said Ruth and Mildred nearly fell out of her chair. But then she continued...'Well I'm sure the ladies could do it.' 'The ladies.' I panicked, 'What ladies?'

'I know Ethel's a quick knitter,' (she was on a roll now) 'And Joan, they could do twenty each and there is Betty, she can knit Fifteen. Yes I'm sure we can do it. A hundred will be fine. When would you like them by? I had one last chance - a ridiculously short deadline, 'Errrr in 4 weeks?' 'Yes that would be fine' said Ruth



The ladies left the salon in triumph and I was left standing there with my mouth gaping open having gone from taking no teddies to Africa to now being committed to take one hundred teddies.

'No Ed, he's eleven he won't want a teddy.' As I walked in front of Ed towards this painfully frail little boy he was looking though me at something behind me. I turned around and Ed was walking behind swinging the teddy.

I could not have got it more wrong. 'Ed,' I shouted 'He wants the teddy!' Ed gave him the bear and he returned the gift with an amazing smile. I have never seen such a big smile, such a pure expression of joy on a face. All thanks to the Knitting Nannies.

I turned to the nurse and asked his name 'THABISO' she says. I felt an amazing, overwhelming emotional response. 'THABISO?' 'Yes' she said 'Thabiso'

As I return to the Orphanage and the gates open, THABISO the six year old runs towards me with his arms wide opening; smiling.

Is this the Thabiso in the Orphanage journey.....

Today ?

Right now..?

This minute..?



I tell myself that He ‘THABISO’ is happy and it’s his day, so make it the best day you possibly can TODAY..!Your emotion is your shit, not his, and you need to leave it at the gate.

**THE CHALLENGE IS THAT WHEN YOU GO HOME YOU HAVE TO PICK THAT BAG UP.....**

The next day we were all up early and made our way down to where the children were all getting ready to go to school. Thabiso was putting on his scuffed shoes, with his heel hanging out the back by two inches and with no shoes laces. I asked momma ‘Has Thabiso not got another pair of shoes?’ Momma looked at me with her

big white eyes and rolled them with a degree of impatience at my ignorance and said ‘Chris, these are his best shoes’. ‘Oh’ I say, cringing at the realisation of my ridiculous assumption.

‘Momma how far is the shoe shop?’ I asked.

‘One hour away’ she informed me . ‘Great,’ I think ‘I can walk that before they get back from school.’

‘By car.’ Momma continues and she rolls her eyes again.

‘Oh.’ I say again. This trip was punctuated by my constant realisation of the reality of the life here.

However, not to be defeated, I rang Dawn, the owner, and said ‘Dawn?’

‘Yes?’ she replied

‘Can I borrow the children for 3 hours?’

‘Yes’, she said ‘of course.’

‘Can I also borrow 2 cars?’

‘Yes’ she replied, but with more than a hint of curiosity in her voice.

The children returned from school and we piled 19 children into 2 cars (Could we do that in the Heath & Safety obsessed UK?). Our precious cargo included a pile of sweets and blaring music as we made our one hour journey to the shoe shop. As we travelled the children politely asked if they could have a sweet. I tell them they can and then change my mind and say, ‘No, have as many as you like!’. Amazed, they seized their opportunity and grabbed handfuls and stuffed them into their pockets.

Our arrival at the shoe shop was quite a spectacle – entering the premises with 19 children in tow, I have never seen so many shop assistants try to vanish into thin air! Before they all disappeared, I managed to grab hold of one of them and issue my request, ‘I would like some help to buy 19 pairs of Black leather school shoes please.’

We set about fitting all 19 children with footwear. Not having any children of my own this was an entirely alien concept - I had no idea how to make sure children's shoes were the right size!. Thankfully, I stepped Debs who showed me exactly what to do. There are many advantages of being a mum.

I handed one young man his new pair of shoes in a nice box and, to my horror, he starts to cry....

His name is Siyaponga and he is the eldest of three brothers found walking naked along a road after being abused. I ask him gently, 'Why are you crying..?'

'I have never had anything new before.' Was his tearful reply.

It is difficult to articulate the emotion that started to build within me as I kneel beside him and found myself saying, 'Siyaponga, you have looked after your brothers to the best of your ability and now it is time for me to look after you, so you enjoy your shoes; you deserve them...'

From that day forward Siyaponga changed and he has become the little boy he deserves to be.....

The Journey back was as noisy as the journey there, but with an even greater heightened sense of excitement. On our arrival back at the orphanage they all carefully placed their precious new shoes outside the dormitory.

Later that day it started to rain and I witnessed Siyaponga run at full pelt back down to the dormitory and pull all 19 pairs of shoes to shelter out of the rain just twelve inches inside the room. Ten minutes later it stopped raining and there he was again, just as swiftly, pushing all 19 pairs back out to enjoy the fresh air.

Down in the boys' dormitory the next morning we saw them all standing proudly in their new bright and shiny shoes ready for school, not one of them with the laces tied. Realising our error, we quickly showed them how to complete the task and sent them proudly off to school. However, the next day when we returned to repeat the exercise, not one of them was wearing their new shoes. I asked Momma why they were not wearing them. Again, she rolled her eyes and told me what I should have realised 'Chris, their feet hurt.' I smiled.

Whilst the children were all at school we took a journey into the mountains with Dawn, the lady that owns the orphanage, and Gordon, the man that sorts out everything for us. We stopped beside a water pump with the many children that were also there filling up their water containers. Ed turned to me and said.

'Chris what are we going to do about that one..?'

Looking across at him, I could see Ed's eyes fixed on a little boy so thin that he clearly had what Gordon called 'a slow puncture'.. He was dying of AIDS.

'Nothing' I said to Ed.

‘What do you mean nothing?’  
 ‘Nothing Ed’  
 ‘But you said we could do anything.’  
 That minute, on that day, was the hardest of my life. In our world anything is possible. In our World you can, but here you cannot. Telling a nineteen year old that the young child he was standing next to was going to die, and there was nothing that he could do to prevent it, was the hardest thing I have ever had to say or do.



A little more worldly wise, Ed placed his glasses on his nose and walked away.

We jumped into the 4x4 and off we drove up the mountain. Our next stop? A lady called Shorty’s house. Shorty is in her sixties and looks after a large number of children whose parents have died. We stopped on the side of the road and Gordon jumped from the car to see if Shorty was going to be happy to see us while we waited behind. We saw Gordon coming back to the 4x4, but something was odd. We could feel the car moving but, if Dawn was in the passenger’s seat and Gordon was walking towards us, what was happening.....?

The expression on Gordon’s face changed to one of panic and he immediately started to run towards us. Debs looked at me, and I looked back at her, as the realisation dawned that the engine was not on; the 4x4 was rolling!

Thinking quickly, Debs and I pushed open the back of the pick-up truck and Debs jumped out, hitting the deck. I followed her immediately and was fortunate enough to have a soft landing as I crashed onto Debs just as she was trying to get to her feet. As we both struggled to get up, Ed appeared from nowhere and flattened us both again!

Upright at last, we all stood to watch the vehicle rolling down the hill with Jake, Jodie and Pete still inside and Dawn in the passenger seat. It then took itself off the road and came to a shuddering halt with its nose in a ditch – its tail in the air. We could just make out three little worried faces peering out the back. The arduous task of retrieving the poor vehicle from its hole then began - which took a while - but then we were back to our original destination!

Shorty was truly lovely. All the children sang for us at the top of the mountain framed by the beautiful backdrop of the sugar cane fields.

As we walked back to the car, Pete spotted a dog in a very poor state with her puppies. The Puppies were emaciated to the extent that you could see their ribs through their skin. They were chained up and the chain seemed to be choking one of the puppies.

Pete started to get very upset. Life is cheap here for a human, so how immeasurably cheap is the life of a dog?

Gordon had a reassuring chat with Pete and told him that he had some sleeping pills in the car that he would give to the puppies. Once again the journey back to the orphanage was ominously quiet.

Eventually, after our amazing three week trip to build a half way house, I was sitting outside the boys' dormitory with Thabiso and Siyabonga on my lap; both crying.

'Why are you crying?' I asked.

'We will never see you again..!' came their distressed reply.

And they were, indeed, correct - they would never see me again. You see, I had done my thing. I'd done what I set out to do: make a young man's dream come true; helped to raise £10,000 for a half way house and brought five amazing people in my life out here to an experience they would never forget. So I did feel good.....but



That was never going to be enough.

That day my journey had just begun.

Jake, one of the teenagers, had shared something very profound with me that week. He said that, when at home, he never took a risk because of his fear of losing everything. He had come to realise that 'loss' in our world is backed up by a cushion, a safety net. 'Even if I lose everything,' he said, with a wisdom far beyond his years, 'I'll have the State to catch me. These children have nothing. When I get home I'm going to take more risks.' In life we always get two choices. My choice that day was to walk away and become another person that had abused their trust, had used them for personal gain and satisfaction. Or I could whisper in their ears 'I will see you in August.'

Sometimes you start a journey and you do not know where it is going, but you know that it is a journey for life.....

The COCO'S Company is now fully committed to the continuous support of the Ubombo Children's Care Centre and the care of Twenty beautiful children through The COCO'S Foundation.

'Sometimes in life when you start something you don't know where it will take you but you have great fun times following the path'.

## 2nd Story

August 2010

Returning, I had mixed emotions: would they remember us?  
Would all the children still be well and alive?

Walking through the gate after a thirty hour journey it was 7pm in the evening and dark. I could see a little figure walking across from the dormitory to the dining area and could hear the noise of crutches on the ground. It was Phumlani a little Orphaned boy that had been left for dead when, at the age of six, he was playing out on the street and got hit by an armed vehicle which broke his back.

“Phumlani!” I shouted. Silence. Then ‘CHRIS,’ came the response. With that all the children came running; so much laughter and fun.

They had not forgotten us.!

I was back again with Ed and a young designer, Olly, who was inspired by the team when they had returned from the first project. The second project was to be a reservoir which would store enough water to last the Orphanage through the summer dry season. This was particularly necessary as some of the children are incontinent and the mommas struggled to keep them clean through the dry season when there is no water.

After working very hard in the incredibly hot weather with the guidance of the local builders and Gordon, we decided to take a day trip out to the beach. A simple excursion to us - not quite so simple in Africa. Once again we piled twenty children in to the cars and set off on the two hour journey to the beach.



Upon arrival, we all tumbled out of the cars; ran around the trees and there lay the mighty ocean in front of us. Not having children I have never understood the phrase ‘through the eyes of a child’. That day I was privileged to experience it for the first time.

On seeing the wide expanse of golden sand and the vast infinity of the ocean, the children stopped. Their eyes, already huge and full of emotion,

widened to the size of saucers as they wriggled their toes in the soft sand and could hear, for the first time, the roar of the mighty sea. I shouted to them all ‘Come on!’ and was running down to the sea, stripping off my clothes as I went.

I then witnessed twenty children tearing past me, flying in front of me, like newly released birds, towards the water. All of a sudden I appreciated the importance of risk assessment in the UK! I felt the water wrapping itself around my ankles and then realised I was now alone. Twenty, now terrified, children were running back up the beach after having been hit, albeit gently, by the first wave!

It took a while to convince them to come back into the water but, when we did, we could not get them out. They loved it - every wave; every grain of sand between their toes. 'Through the eyes of a child' - I got it.!

Eventually, we all dragged ourselves out of the sea and went to a concrete building to shower and dry off. There were a number of men just hanging around near the shower block and, for the first time since I had arrived, I felt vulnerable. There was no way that I was going to let the children into the shower block alone. One of the mommas went into the girls' block and then I ventured into the boys' block. The adults then left the block and the boys got changed.

One of the orphans needed a hand to change his nappy. This I had never done before. I went outside to see if I could see a momma, but they were all in the girls' block. The young boy called my name and asked for help again.

The gift of helping a young child when they truly need it is one I will never forget, for this young man had so many vivid scars serving as painful, permanent reminders of his suffering at the hands of his abusers. I had to look beyond them and succeeded in cleaning him up and changing him. Ten minutes later I found myself around the back of the block on my knees crying, trying to understand why an adult would, or how they could, hurt a child.

Pulling myself together, I went back in to the shower block to help the other children. Siyponga stood up on the bench naked drying himself off. I was immediately transported back into my own past-happy memories of my father lifting me up onto the bench after swimming to keep my feet dry. Siyaponga shouted 'Chris!' I turned and said 'What is it Siyaponga? Put some clothes on.' 'Chris,' he said, smiling warmly, 'You are my best friend.'

How can a child that has experienced so much pain at the hands of those he should feel safe with stand naked in front of an adult and trust again? As a tear rolled down my cheek, I realised that, when I believed I had seen all the horror there was to see and could compose myself, something else amazing happened to cause another tidal wave of emotion to flood over me again.

The journey back to the Orphanage for me was a time to reflect, placing a smile on my face and a tear in my eye. With my head and heart still experiencing a feeling of turmoil, we stopped off at the ' Wimpy' I ordered twenty burgers and chips. I thought the waiter was going to have a heart attack as the children piled in through the doors! So much happiness; so much laughter and a lot of full bellies. I picked up my tray to throw away the few remaining burnt chips at the bottom of my carton and turned around to see the children carefully placing their spare chips in their pockets.

The world we live in is so different and so far removed. They don't know when they will eat next. The reservoir was completed with the help of the local builders and Ed and Olly's muscle and the children now have clean running water to drink and to bathe in. I extend my gratitude for all the support and help that our clients have given to the COCO'S Foundation and, my friends, this would not have been possible without such support.

## 3rd Story

**W**hen we returned to the UK I always felt so upset that I would find myself just breaking down and dwelling in a dark place. After spending time with my dear friend and life coach, Debbie Green, I started over time to unravel my feelings and emotions and thoughts, but it never seemed to get easier I just remained 'stuck'.

One day I was with Debbie and really struggling and I don't know who was finding it more difficult, her or me. I felt stranded. I was thousands of miles away and felt I could not do anything.

I kept taking myself back to the time when I was driving the children to school one day and I picked up a little girl who was limping and her older brother and gave them a lift. They had no Mum; no Dad and walked one and a half hours each day to school. There they would be fed and then start their day of learning. After lessons, they would walk back home again and have to fetch water on the way. Every evening they would return to an empty home. The little girl was six; the boy ten. Whilst at school their home was often raided of the little food they had.

This is where it got 'stuck.'

There was a significant chance that little girl would be raped one day on the journey to school and what could I do? Nothing.!

Debbie wisely counselled me. 'Chris, do what you do best. The 'Doing'.

I left school with no exams to write home about, but the one thing I was always good at was the 'doing' - in other words getting off my bum, making a plan and 'doing' it. That day the COCO'S Foundation was born to help. My mission is to help and thus was born the concept of bringing adult volunteers out to South Africa to orphanages to help.

Initially the thought of bringing adults out to help out scared me witless. With teenagers you can tell them what needs to be done and they will pretty much do it, although they need constant encouragement and cajoling! We had six adults that were really interested in making a difference and wanted to come on a trip to build a much needed chicken house.

A mixed bunch consisting of:

A house wife - the hardest job and most underpaid in the world

A Social worker - why would you want to swap one set of problems for another?

A Gardener - good for his muscle

A Nurse - great to have on any team

An Office worker and.....

A fourteen year old teenager - Help.....!

My right hand crew: the trustees and Debs (without this lady my dreams would not have become a reality and who would be our momma and feed us all) and Ed, the muscle and driver, all met at Heathrow and a new journey, which was now their journey as well as mine, began.

The beauty of this trip was that I had never fully comprehended that adults are so multi-skilled and, once you have a meeting in the morning, they just get on with it and do it and more.....

Within four days the chicken house was complete and with the prospect of the team sitting around doing nothing, I took the decision to start the May 2012 project, which was to lay the base of the community hall.

This team was fantastic! Every day they just threw themselves into mixing concrete and laying the base until it was completed and ready for May 2012. Not only that, whilst some of the team were engaged in this arduous task, two of them and the teenager sewed for three days non-stop making curtains and duvet covers for all the children. The simplest of things can result in so much happiness.



I believe each volunteer took something different with them on their trip and from their trip. . I don't know what, but all I can say is that they all have left a happy and lasting memory in all the children's lives.

With the first adult trip under my belt I am now starting to feel a little less 'stuck' and the possibility of giving seems endless and free.

In our world a child grows up so quickly and is eager to get older faster in a world that is so enriched with 'things' and 'stuff'. These children have enriched me with the essence of life itself. They have nothing and yet are always happy. They have experienced so much pain and yet are always full of joy. They have taught me to play again.



# COCO'S Foundation

[info@cocosfoundation.co.uk](mailto:info@cocosfoundation.co.uk)  
[www.cocosfoundation.co.uk](http://www.cocosfoundation.co.uk)