

Hello Everyone,

Here we are a year on, and what a year it has been.

I look back to that day when our first child, Benedict, arrived and can hardly believe how far we have come and how fast. The Happy House journey hasn't been without many trials and tribulations, sleepless nights and anxiety, but as I look through the window at my kids playing and singing, I know every ounce of pain has brought us so much gain!

Where would these children have been today without the Happy House? I dare not think. I know, for certain, that many of them would not have survived had they been left where they were.

The children change so quickly when they come home to us. They arrive pitiful little people, burdened with emotional and physical loads that no child should ever have to bear. They are almost always dirty, hungry and poorly too. As the Happy House casts its spell and the magic begins to work, each child emerges from his or her chrysalis of confusion as a beautiful butterfly with the freedom to fly ... grasping every opportunity we put their way.

The speed with which we get them glowing with good health is hastened by daily doses of multi-vitamins, donated by a producer in the UK plus so many more also given by you.

The vitamins are giving our children such a good start. They are strong, healthy and their skin glows. So many came with horrible skin problems and the vitamins are making such a difference. Everyone notices and comments on how well they look. Their appetites have doubled, taking our food bill ever higher!

The nursery school opened in January, our own children were its first pupils and what a change we have seen in them. It's really astounding! They are learning so fast in an environment with the best resources, unlike anything people in this area of Kenya have seen before. With the help of a very experienced teacher from the USA, Sue Disanto, who was here for three months we have introduced our teachers to western teaching methods and they are discovering how children can learn through play. The teachers are fired with enthusiasm as their little charges pick up everything they teach so quickly. They are like small sponges soaking up every bit of knowledge and then thirsty for more! They are not as tired as they were when they were at school locally; their days are shorter, with time for breaks and a nap for the smaller ones. They are also well fed as we provide healthy snacks and a very good lunch! We opened after the new term had begun, so we only have six fee paying pupils, but we are advertising extensively and word of mouth is reaching others parents so we feel confident that the summer term, starting in April, will bring us more paid-for pupils taking us nearer to our goal of bringing in free-place kids from outside, excluded, by poverty, from so called free education. Parents are still expected to buy uniform shoes books etc. If a Mum cannot feed her children every day she can certainly cannot afford to buy books.

Our first exams have brought excellent results, taking us to top of the league and in the area sports our children did so well in the events that they now go on to represent the school in the district competition. This drives home how much of an advantage our children have – they are well fed, have daily vitamins and go to

sleep in a bed and wake up to a breakfast. Much more than any of their fellow competitors, from other schools, will have at home. They probably go to school tired and unfed giving our kids, nurtured and nourished a head start.

Our nursery and innovative teaching methods are already attracting attention from other schools with heads eager to send their teachers on visits to learn, from us, new ways of doing things. They are so impressed by what they see and keen to take our ideas into their classrooms. Even simple things, like using natural resources, foraged from the garden, for making collages is totally new. And ideal because they are free!

We held our first parents' meeting last week and although small in number we had a 100% attendance, every parent was delighted with the way their child has come on since joining us, reporting how they are happy, confident, learning fast, making new friends and keen to come to school.

I have also been taking the Happy House message to the business community. Last week I was invited to give a presentation at Malindi Rotary Club which was received so well, we are hopeful that they may now consider funding a project here.

We also network with other charities. If we have anything surplus to our requirements, like heavy blankets which in this heat we will never use, or really heavy woollies we are sending them to a charity working in Nairobi where it really does get cold! We have also donated beds from our store to a charity which faced a real crisis.

We are due back in court on March 24 when the case against the woman running the “children’s home” from where we, with the children’s office, rescued six kids we now has in our care. It is the first child trafficking case to be heard in Kenya and we are hopeful of a good outcome. The children, who had been taken from their families and brought many many miles to this “ home”, have settled in to our care but once the case is heard arrangements will be made to get them back to their families. It will be hard for them we know and for us too, but it is the right thing to do. They have families who want them, who gave them up believing they were going where they would be well looked after and educated, not left hungry and living in squalor. They have to go home to give us room to take more kids in much greater need, who have less than nothing.

Keeping our family of 56 well fed and well looked after costs so much and we are living from month to month. There are so many things we can’t budget for, emergency hospital, medical or dental bills, new school shoes for feet that grow so fast, new tyres for vehicles that have to work so hard on terrible roads.

Our grocery bill alone averages £200 a week, sometimes as much as £240, which includes fresh and dried foodstuffs, nappies, cleaning materials etc. Dave does the shopping and being a true Yorkshire man, always gets the best price. It may take a time but he likes nothing better than a good-hearted haggle!

On top of this cost we have a wages bill of £2,000 a month to meet and electricity costs about £160 a month.

We can't be sure when or what repairs will be needed, it cost us £300 to repair the pump in the back well but we had no option, it had to be done.

We are growing what we can and the gardens are now being planted ready for when the rains come, when everything with grow so fast, but we are long way from being self-sufficient in fruit and veg.

We are such a small charity that meeting ends meet is always a worry. We are so, so grateful to all you for all you do by holding fundraising events and to those of you who visit and bring with you our everyday essentials – Pampers, Sudocreme, Vaseline, toothpaste, soap etc. We are now desperate for baby vitamins, in syrup form, so if you can bring some if you are visiting or could send a couple of bottles it would help our babies. If anyone is travelling here and wants advice on what to bring they can email Elizabeth in UK [elizabethgomm@childrenofwatamu.net](mailto:elizabethgomm@childrenofwatamu.net) and she will be delighted to give you some guidance.

We are thrilled that our sponsors have warmed to our suggestion that they send money for their children's savings account instead of gifts for birthday and Christmas. Again Elizabeth will tell you the best way of doing this. We will always make sure every child gets a present and you can still send the cards, letters and photos they love receiving.

Our child sponsorship scheme is the financial underpinning, and we are trying to make it unique, special and very personal. We know how much you enjoy getting to know your kids, receiving emails from them; their exam results and the calendars for 2011 were a huge hit. The kids had so many thank yous!

We are still desperate for sponsors, we still have children who have no sponsors, so we appealing to everyone to try to “Sign up a sponsor this summer”. We know that some of you have already, but their maybe someone you haven’t yet told about your Happy House kid who would like to share in the wonderful and life-enhancing experience of joining a child’s sponsor family. £20 a month to change a life isn’t too much to ask and you can download a sponsorship form from the website or ask Elizabeth to send you one.

Now we are getting ready to celebrate the Happy House first birthday on Sunday, March 20, with a family party. We are planning to make it a really happy day for our kids. They are already practicing their walks for a fashion show, when they will model so many of the beautiful outfits you have donated, we are also going to repeat the dance competition we held at Christmas, which was a huge hit. I’m yet to meet an African who can’t dance. Every one of our children is a star performer – even the babies wiggle with rhythm.

Elizabeth Gomm writes:

We have a busy start to the year in the UK, netting some good gains for the Happy House funds

Events included a fair in Blackpool, held by volunteer Hailey Aspinall, a Pampered Chef evening arranged by Paula Lochrie, in Oxfordshire; a non-uniform day for childcare students at Doncaster College, plus, Barbara Holden's Chinese Banquet in Blackpool and a Donkey Derby, staged by Agnes and Brian Crighton, in Perthshire.

There's a lot more to come too - including another Pampered Chef evening, this time in Blackpool in April, a May Craft Fair and Family Fun Day at Stanley Park's Art Deco on Saturday, May 7. If you fancy a day out in Blackpool make it May 7, we'd love to see you!

I had a very warm welcome from Barton WI when I went to talk to them about the Happy House and have quite a few more talks booked for the coming months. Please let organisations and schools that we are happy to give talks, provided they are not too far away.

It's lovely to hear how pleased you have all been to receive calendars from your sponsor children - if you haven't had one, it could be a problem with the mailing list so email me ([elizabethgomm@childrenofwatamu.net](mailto:elizabethgomm@childrenofwatamu.net)) and let me know all your details. I also know we were a few short, but will try to get a personal artwork for those people missed now while I am at the Happy House Lynn McCluskey, Billy and the team did a fantastic job organising the kids to make calendars, it's not easy to keep track when you have dozens of excited and enthusiastic kids to sort out. Believe me, I know! A special thanks to those people who sent stamps to help keep down postage costs (please keep them coming, I get through so many stamps. They should be sent to my address: 6 Burwood Drive, Blackpool, FY3 8NS).

If you are planning a fundraising event, please let me know. I will get something on the blog and on our Facebook group page to publicise it.

Also if you have any suggestions for organisations we can approach for funding or for prizes, please let me know that too. I'll do the legwork and then hand the forms over to Sue.

Helping the Happy House does feel like being part of a big family, and as a family, we must work together to bring in as much money as we can.

You know that every penny you raise goes towards providing for our family, which does make us pretty unusual, so when you raise £1, it's £1 closer to putting food in little tummies, clothes on little backs or paying a dentist's bill to ensure little teeth stay healthy.

Please, please make today the day you pledge to go a step further ... by signing up sponsors, organising an event or making a donation.

Sue back again:-

Lastly, I want to thank you all, from the bottom of my heart, for your love, friendship and support. I have been working here in Watamu for 11 years now and some of you have been with me and Dave almost since the start many others have joined us over the years. We have made so many friends from across the world.

You are always there when we or our Happy House family, need you. You show such compassion and concern. We have travelled a long and bumpy road to get this far, and it's far from over (we

have so much more to do) but without each and every one of you it would not have possible.

So while we are the ones having the party, and we do wish you could all be here to join the fun, we'd like to say a great big Happy Birthday to YOU, too.