

# DOWN to EARTH

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## Providing a Safe House for Children

*Don Sayers, EI Country Representative in South Africa, writes to tell us about the work they are doing in South Africa amongst abandoned and vulnerable children.*

The Safe House ministry was formed by Emmanuel International South Africa (EI SA) in 2009 and is located in the informal township of Masiphumelele, south of Cape Town. EI SA's partner in keeping orphans and vulnerable children safe is African Hope Trust, co-founded with Don Sayers and American missionary colleague, Bill Eames.

After working in HIV care and prevention for 6 years prior, Don was all too familiar with the plight of children that were left behind in the wake of the HIV pandemic - the desperately high number of abandoned and abused children left to fend for themselves and the



We were blessed to have Don and Rachel Sayers and their children, Danielle, Hudson and Nate, with us at our annual Summer Event / Garden Party, where Don gave us some feedback on the work that they are doing in South Africa.

The family spent a week in the UK on their way back to South Africa, returning from furlough in Canada. It was great to get to know them better and hear more about their lives and work in South Africa.

While in the UK, the family did some sightseeing (visiting Roman baths, castles and a couple of cathedrals) and traced some family history (visiting Don's great great grandfather's birthplace and grave - Tom Sayer is quite famous in the UK!)





increase in drug and alcohol abuse in the impoverished townships. Don and Bill worked on the concept of foster parent-led homes in the informal settlements of South Africa as a practical and sustainable way to provide a family for the children who did not have that hope. These Safe Houses are partnered with local churches to improve the spiritual support of the mums and children, as well as logistical support in counselling, transport, tutoring and discipleship.

The goal of the Safe House ministry is to build homes, not just of safety, but genuine places of familial nurturing for children who have been abandoned, abused or orphaned. The children have the opportunity to be raised in a Godly home environment where permanent foster mothers or parents, from the same culture, raise them as their own (but legally as a foster parent).

Each home is led by a full-time and devoted house mother who raises and cares for 6 children in each home,

24 hours a day, every day. This size allows for a genuine sense of 'family' for the children who are referred to the safe homes and enables the house mother to spend quality time with the children rather than simply feeding and sheltering them. It is a place of love and discipleship.

The small scale has very real benefits as compared to larger institutional sized orphanages where the children often come out 'institutionalised', but the other side of the coin is that it requires 'more coin' per child. It's simply an economy of scale reality but worth the longer term results of children who will know what it means to live, love and learn in a family type environment. This is crucial for overcoming so many societal challenges in informal settlements where broken homes are the norm.

The mothers view their work with the children as a calling rather than a 'job'. It is through this devotion that we are able to create a genuine home environment



where the children begin to view the foster-mum as 'mum' and the other children as siblings.

The children remain in the house indefinitely or until extended family members can be found. However, even when extended family is found, they are often not willing or able to care for the child that has been left behind or removed from an abusive home environment.

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. But if the village is raising the child, then no one is. Accountability, intimacy and commitment is lost when a community is tasked with the role that demands individual parents. We believe it takes parents to raise a child and, while the house parents in a Safe House are not the children's biological parents, they commit their lives to raise and to nurture the children as their very own.



## A Typical Day

A day in the life of a child within the African Hope Trust Safe House is a familiar routine. The foster mums are with the children all day and all night, just as any mother would hope to be. They wake the children up early to get them dressed and fed before school. Not an easy task when there are 6 children!

The children walk to the primary and high schools (only about 4 minutes and 15 minutes away, respectively). The schools in the township, however, are hugely understaffed and overcrowded. The primary schools especially often have 50 to 60 children per class, which can lead to a very noisy and disruptive learning environment. This is why tutoring after school is a priority. Most of the actual learning takes place in the home after school.



Another challenge is that many of the children that are referred have not been attending school of any kind. They have been waiting for a place to call home and have been moved from short-term facilities and shelters with no regular school schedule at all.

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When the children come home, they have a small list of chores to complete and then, on the tutoring days, will sit with local or international volunteers to help bring them up to their proper grade level or finish the homework assignments. It is a busy time of the day.

The older girls like to help with the cooking and this is a good time for the house mums to discuss some of their challenges and past trauma. There is a strong cultural significance of young girls learning to cook and is a very natural social time for the mums and daughters to bond and hand down biblical knowledge and cultural traditions.

Evenings are times where the children have free time to read, play, watch movies and then finish the day with a time of bible study and devotional that is led by the house mums.

## **Tamara's story**



Tamara is the youngest of 5 siblings that were referred to our second Safe House in 2011. Tamara and her older brothers and sister were placed in separate shelters and short-term facilities when their mother fell very ill because of HIV.

She had been sick for many years but she was not longer able to provide for or care for her children so the Department of Social Services placed them in separate facilities, wherever there was space all over the city. For approximately 3 years the children only had phone contact with their siblings. They also fell very far behind in school during the regular moves and shuffles between shelters.

We had just completed the second Safe House when we received a phone call from a Social worker in Cape Town who found out we had space for 6 children. She told us the challenge of finding a place for all 5 siblings to live and that our home was their only chance.

The siblings moved in a week later and they have been living as a family for the first time in years. Tamara was just a baby when she was removed by the state and for her this was her first time meeting her siblings and it has been a real blessing to be a part of reuniting them and allowing them to grow up together in an environment where they are loved and nurtured by a 'house mum'.

The HIV positive mother died 6 months after moving into the Safe House and Beauty was able to take them to visit her regularly before her death. There was a chance to say good-bye and to grieve together and know that they are in safe hands living with a mother who loves them as her own.

Tamara is now in grade 6 at Ikanyo Primary School, loves music, Sunday School and video nights at home.