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My quest to help victims of Mugabe's regime

Cassandra Jardine reports on how one woman's touching story set a British MP on a mission to help Zimbabwe's suffering

In 2002, former MP Tom Benyon met the first of a series of women who were to change the direction of his life. “Cathy Olds was a quiet woman from Zimbabwe who had suffered from polio,” he remembers. “Over dinner at a friend’s house, I teased out of her that her husband, Martin, had been murdered during one of the early farm repossessions. He fought back, then ran away to hide in a bath at their home, but died of his wounds before he could be helped.” Cathy had fled to England with their two children.

The situation of this penniless family touched Benyon so deeply that he raised £8,000 to help her settle in Britain. In the process, he attracted the attention of someone of a very different ilk: Dame Daphne Park, former senior M16 officer and principal of Somerville College, Oxford. This formidable woman – she reminded him of the late British actress Dame Margaret Rutherford – believed he could help not just one but thousands of victims of Robert Mugabe’s regime.

The charity Zane: Zimbabwe, a National Emergency was born. Mr Benyon thought it would be a five-year task, “but every time I came to the top of a hill, I saw another one”.

In late 2010, with political tension and incidents of violence increasing in Zimbabwe as Mr Mugabe calls for another election in 2011, and price rises making it impossible for pensioners even to eat, he believes the need is greater than ever.

Initially, Mr Benyon, 68 – who has a long history of fighting “monstrous injustice” – agreed to raise money, and to help repatriate some of the

many Zimbabweans with British passports trapped in the country for lack of funds. Visiting Zimbabwe in 2003 with his wife Jane, a retired social worker specialising in care of the elderly, he began to see the extent of the problem. Meeting individuals such as Colonel Norman Travers, he felt a profound moral responsibility to help them in their time of need.

“Norman was a man with a great craggy, sunburnt face. I met him in a nursing home where he told me about his time driving a tank in the Second World War. He had been awarded the Military Cross because, despite heavy shelling, he had plunged into a blazing vehicle to pull one of his men out, but by the time I met him he had lost everything – even his MC had been stolen during a raid on his house.” It was a proud moment for both of them when, on Armistice Day 2008, Mr Benyon pinned a replacement MC on Col Travers’s chest.

The son of a First World War veteran and a mother who devised crossword puzzles for The Daily Telegraph, and who also wrote scripts for Morecambe and Wise, Mr Benyon joined the Army after leaving school in 1963. But it was not the career for him as, he admits, he lacks all sense of direction.

Instead, he went into Parliament, focusing his remarkable energies on prisons and social service reform. In the 1990s he fought a dogged battle on behalf of those who lost their homes and money as a result of the Lloyds debacle. But he has always given generously to charity, and started them where he sees a need.

While an MP, he set up and ran a volunteer group in Aylesbury for the Guidepost Trust, a charity to rehabilitate the mentally ill back into the community. A committed Christian, he lives on private investments but he has also raised money for two schools in Eastern India and started a Food Bank close to his home in Oxford.

Early on in his charitable career, he confided to Frank (Lord) Longford that he feared that he had mixed motives for helping the poor. “We’ve all got mixed motives,” Longford replied, “I suggest you shut up and get on with it.”

Zane has proved his greatest challenge because of the scale of the problem and the difficulties of operating in a country where corruption and violence are rife. During the past eight years, Mr Benyon’s background as a soldier, politician and businessman has proved

invaluable. "I know how old soldiers think, I know what levers to pull, and I know how to run things," he said.

He also knows how to spot committed people who will get help to those who need it. Again, women have shown him the way. As a non-Zimbabwean, he was struggling with the practicalities of operating in that country until he met a brave local doctor and a former teacher. Their names cannot be divulged, nor their pictures shown. Even the local names of the organisations through which they work must remain secret because it could endanger lives. "We aren't known as Zane in Zimbabwe," said Mr Benyon wryly, "because Mr Mugabe doesn't believe there's an emergency."

Between them, the doctor and teacher have been running Zane within Zimbabwe and extending its work. "I don't want to overplay the Scarlet Pimpernel stuff," he said, but it is Mr Benyon's proudest boast that, in the course of eight years, not one penny of the money (some raised by Zane, some distributed on behalf of other charities) has gone astray. Through careful, but always legal, means every penny has reached those most in need.

Over the years the charity has expanded its activities: "We didn't just want to help the blue-eyed." It now also helps other groups within Zimbabwe, a country of eight million people where unemployment stands at 90 per cent. The introduction of the US currency last year has encouraged economic stability, but it has resulted in prices rising as much as fivefold. Even food, let alone nursing homes, is now beyond many pensioners' reach.

In the country's slums, there is little medical or educational provision. Zane's operations now include the provision of drugs to those affected by HIV/Aids, a makeshift school, and the Jump for Joy programme for correcting club feet. The aim of the latter is to address this common problem before children's bones set. Surgery is rare in a country that has seen an exodus of doctors.

The charity continues to help 1,800 of the dispossessed white Zimbabweans who have no family to rescue them. Tough people who have worked hard all their lives, they are not used to asking for handouts even when they are starving and in physical pain. "People move from old

to helpless very quickly,” Mr Benyon observed, “because they can’t afford medical treatment.”

Raising money is not easy. This year, Mr Benyon exhausted himself by walking from Edinburgh to London to generate funds for people whose plight has touched him deeply. Among them is Helen, an orphan who married in 1939 and worked unremittingly for 40 years to create a farm in the bush. Now a widow of 87, with no children, she has lost her farm, but never complains. “I find her fortitude in the face of the loss of everything she holds dear quite extraordinary. She is not bitter. Each time I go she gives me something that she has knitted. Sometimes it is bootees for my grandchildren; last time it was a blue and pink loo seat [cover].”

There are thousands of such people in need of Zane’s assistance, but funds are scarce so waiting lists are long. “The pain of having to turn people away,” sighs Mr Benyon, “is more than our staff can bear.”