

volunteer action to prevent suicide

**NEWSLETTER – March 2015**

**From the Regions**

Dear Volunteers,

Welcome to the March 2015 Befrienders Worldwide Regional Newsletter! In this edition we include information on our plans for the IASP conference in June in Montreal. We also are including some end of year 2014 news from Africa, from South Asia and from Australasia/Pacific. From now on we would like to issue the BW Newsletter every 6 months so next time we will be happy to receive contributions from North America, Latin America, Europe, and East Asia. **The Befrienders Worldwide Board is looking for a volunteer to lead our twinning programme. The selected candidate will be invited to join us in Montreal and Befrienders Worldwide will pay for all the costs including travel. If you are interested please contact one of the Trustees or your regional co-ordinator.**

**IASP MONTREAL JUNE 2015**

A centerpiece for 2015, “The 28th World Congress of the International Association for Suicide Prevention” is being staged 16-20 June in Montreal, Canada. Our Trustees are encouraging BW members to attend this Congress on “New Discoveries and Technologies in Suicide Prevention”, a long time interest of Brian Mishara, the Vice Chair of BW and IASP Congress organizer. *(“Suicide Prevention & New Technologies” edited by Brian Mishara & Ad Kerkhof 2013)* ([*www.crise.ca/eng/mb\_details.asp?section=membres&usager=****mishara****b*](http://www.crise.ca/eng/mb_details.asp?section=membres&usager=misharab)*)*

Of special interest to BW members is the planned post-Congress Conference for BW attendees. Starting with lunch on Saturday June 20 and followed by meetings in the afternoon, dinner in the evening, further meetings on Sunday and concluding around 5pm on June 21; the conference will address the needs of members under the reinvigorated Befrienders Worldwide banner, including information on BW’s Training program materials and on Twinning Brian is kindly offering to organise complimentary accommodation and meals “on campus” for BW attendees across the Congress and the BW Conference, and he will be coordinating the program with the Trustees and Regional Coordinators.

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**AFRICA REGION: Befrienders Mauritius**

Befrienders Mauritius is the sole Non-Governmental Organization in Mauritius providing emotional support through active listening to people in distress and despair with suicidal tendencies. This has been our service since November 1995 when the organization was started. After 19 years of dedicated and continuous service and still facing an alarming suicide trend, with the rejuvenation of suicide tendencies, we thought that it’s high time to have a “Reflexion” to consider where we started from, where we today, where we want to go, what our new mission, objectives and goals are and how and by what means we will attain them. “Reflexion day” was organized on 9th November, 2014 and various issues such as the legal, in-house and outreach challenges were debated. Other topics included how to improve communications while using new technologies such as mobile phones and face book while maintaining confidentiality and observing anonymity.

Some of the resolutions passed were that members must be given legal knowledge so as to know their limitations and safety nets and members should be encouraged to develop ideas on how to retain volunteers and start a mentorship program. Discussions were also held on Befrienders networking with other Institutions in Mauritius dealing with mental health.

**Befriender Uganda**

Befriender Uganda is the first and only Suicide Prevention center in the country, which provides counseling, psychosocial support and information services to local people at no cost. As suicide is taboo in the African culture, people fear to talk about these tragedies in our communities. This has led to high rates of suicide rates in the country. People face many stresses including financial, political and , relationships and they find themselves with no comfort for their distress- they may end up choosing deliberate self-harm and suicide to stop the pain and this is where Befriender Uganda comes in with the befriending service.

Befriender Uganda organized a launch of an awareness event themed “Out of Silence.” This was a Walk through Kampala district’s suburbs like Mulago, Kalerwe, Makerere, Wandegeya which are part of both Kawempe and Rubaga Divisions. This walk was to create awareness on services offered by Befriender Uganda. This was also an opportunity to inform people about the impact of suicides in their communities especially if survivors don’t reach out for professional help. The event also facilitated Befriender Uganda’s “Seek Help” campaign, which urges people to seek help when they feel troubled or refer those they think need help. The event received over 200 participants and over 1000 people were reached. The event received television news coverage on three locally dominant stations thus the message reached out to over 40,000 people.

 

*The team that organized the Out of Silence event,. Some of the participants --after the walk.*

The center has experienced challenges but the dedication of the team’s interest to help vulnerable groups is one development that has cemented the organization’s future in the country. We were so blessed that our activities led to the program’s feature in the District Newspapers, something that we are grateful for. Our grief counseling attracted local entities like MU-JHU (Makerere University John Hopkins University research collaboration) who saw it as vital for their participants and members (especially the HIV positive people) to access our services.

Our package is effective as far as service delivery is concerned and this is why we all enjoy our volunteer work at Befriender Uganda. The programs are a Helpline(0800200450), grief counseling, suicide ambassadorship and community out-reach in which local communities are educated on suicide, including identification of suicidal behavior and help in referring troubled people for professional help. Other programs are psycho social support for suicide survivors**,** research and suicide studies and referrals program which links with psychiatrists and mental health advocate organizations to help clients with special needs. With these programs and activities Befriender Uganda is becoming influential in people’s lives. This is why we say, “*Together we can save lives*.”

**Befrienders South Africa**

The Befrienders South Africa office is the national coordination office of the Befriender centres in South Africa composed of Botshabelo, Setshabelo, Uitenhage and Bloemfontein. In addition to the coordination work, the BSA office has activities of their own The BSA attended six Free State Consultative Welfare Forum Meetings during 2014 - the forum consists of Non-Government Organizations and Community Based Organizations which deliberate on various issues touching on their work and is a valuable opportunity for networking, sharing and receiving information. In addition to this BSA hosted ten Free State Regional Committee meetings where Befriender challenges and solutions were discussed.

The BSA office is part of the Bloemfontein Training Team and they presented two Befriender Courses. A session on suicide was also held at the Department of Correctional Services. The BSA President also had an opportunity to deliver a message of support at the Mangaung Metro Municipality's Good and Positive Family Values Program. The BSA office hosted the BSA AGM on the 20th October 2014 which adds a lot of value to the Befrienders work in the country. As part of the administrative duties, the BSA Office submitted the reports to the various funders including Witherow Trust; the National Lotteries Board and the Directorate Non-Profit Organizations.

**Befrienders Kenya**



From left Ms M. Mulindi, Dr. A. Fleischmann (WHO), Ms. D. Sen (invited speaker), Dr S. Saxena (WHO)

*Photo by Dag Rekve,WHO*

Befrienders Kenya was represented at the launch of the first ever World Health Organization (WHO) report on Suicide. On the morning of 5th September Merab Mulindi (Befrienders Kenya) was at the WHO office in Geneva, Switzerland where the event was taking place. She was both a participant and a speaker after a film on suicide taken around the world was shown and she shared her personal experience, passion and work in suicide prevention.

The journey to the Geneva launch started when Befrienders Kenya was approached by Africa Mental Health Foundation (a partner organization) to be a part of the interviews for the film on suicide by WHO. The invitation was given based on the fact that Befrienders Kenya work is with depressed and suicidal people. The task was to identify and organize willing persons to be interviewed for the film according to set guidelines which we were shared before-hand.. Merab Mulindi was one of those who shared her story and this is what led to the invitation to participate in the launch of the historical report. The conference room in Geneva had high ranking officials from WHO, high ranking officials from International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), representatives from the health sector, Ambassadors and other representatives from various countries and from national and international organizations all in one way or another supporting Suicide Prevention.

“I felt humbled to be part of such an important global forum. I was humbled because participation in the forum was to me an indication that WHO was recognizing the work being done at community level by charitable organizations such as those in the Befrienders Worldwide network,” Merab shares. “Indeed as policies are put in place at national and international levels, it matters that a person in distress is able to find a non-judgmental person to listen to them and thereby support them to get through a difficult moment when all seems hopeless and suicide seems to be the only option.

The report that was launched is aptly titled *Preventing Suicide, A global Imperative* for indeed losing a life to suicide every 40 seconds should have all of us springing into action to make the much desired change-because even one life lost to suicide is way too much and should lead us all working towards suicide prevention.

**Samaritans Bulawayo, Zimbabwe**

During the year, Samaritans Bulawayo had a number of activities. One main activity was organizing a training session for potential volunteers. From the group trained, thirteen volunteers are now active with center duties. This number, although it falls short of the ideal, has improved our manning of the roster significantly. Another important step is the website (*samaritansbefriendersbyo.org*) which is now launched and running. It is hoped that the website will go a long way in providing awareness of our Samaritans/BW services. There is a plan to synchronize this website with the BW website.

Bulawayo also has a number of planned activities. One of these is an exchange program. Funds permitting, they are pursuing a regional exchange program with South Africa in the coming year. They are glad to learn that BW are reactivating the twinning program as they have been beneficiaries of this program before and would therefore like to be twinned both within the regional and internationally.

The feasibility of establishing a branch in Mutare is currently a work in progress but funding is a challenge for this project. The center therefore intends to embark on a fund raising campaign to raise funds towards the same. They are therefore making an appeal to the BW family if there are any branches who can chip in to support this noble cause. Despite several challenges, Bulawayo had a colorful end of year dinner, which gave an opportunity for volunteers and their spouses to socialize. Bob, one of the volunteers entertained the audience by churning out some golden oldies, to the delight of the audience.

**SOUTH ASIA REGION Regional Training Workshop**

Yeshim Iqbal. Founder Kaan Pete Roi Bangladesh

The 15th of June 2014 marked a red letter day in the Sri Lanka Sumithrayo calendar. We commemorated 40 years of volunteer service to the despairing and suicidal.

Thoughts of holding a conference to commemorate this milestone had been in our minds for over a year and as if on cue the arrival of Vanda Scott on a visit to the SLS Rural Programme gave us the opportunity to share our ideas with her. Vanda suggested we hold a South Asia Regional Training Workshop which opened an entirely new concept and the prospect was exhilarating! We decided then and there to hold the Training Workshop as a fitting tribute to our late Founder Joan de Mel and our other Founder members.

It was January 2014 and we had again by our good fortune, Liz Try with us! She is a Member of BW Training Task Force. Her optimistic approach to anything however daunting have us the fuel to light up our already heightened enthusiasm. Teamwork and team spirit would see us through the biggest pitfalls we encounter said Liz but what we did not have was time. Only nine and a half months!

Like Liz said, working together in the same spirit we made things happen. We decided on Paradise Beach Resort, Negombo as the venue. It was very close to the airport. The hotel was beyond our expectation- homely, welcoming with the view of the sea from every bedroom. The theme for the workshop was ’40 Years and Beyond’. Our slogan was ‘Helping With a Smile’ in keeping with the Sri Lankan miles and hospitality!! We kept to time lines and we were able to meet the targets. Our dear friends and closest neighbour, Befrienders India gave us their fullest support and care. We were overjoyed that BW’s newest member, Kaan Pete Roy, Bangladesh was sending three volunteers. So together with our own Sumithrayo volunteers from our 10 centres we had almost 90 delegates! Dr. Lakshmi, founder of the BI Sneha, accepted our call to be the main presenter and facilitator and assured us of her loving support, which made us feel truly blessed. We were more than delighted when Samaritans of Singapore accepted our invitation to be a part of the Presenters Team. Tanja, Head of BW Twinning Task Force was willing to come all the way from Serbia to help our volunteers in South Asia. Our volunteers are familiar with Liz’s training skills and were looking forward to participate in them. We may be thousands of miles from BW centres across the world but the BW spirit brought us together to learn and share during four unforgettable days in a tiny Island called Sri Lanka. Liz arrived days before the Workshop to give us moral support. She and a couple of SLS volunteers welcomed delegates who arrived at all hours of the night! The delegates were delighted to meet Penny, our Founder’s daughter who patiently answered questions and posed for photographs!

**Thursday 9th October 2014** was the inauguration ceremony scheduled at 5pm. In true Sri Lankan style the entourage was escorted to the hall by Kandyan dancers and drummers to the strains of conch shell. The lighting of the traditional oil lamp decorated with white jasmines and the singing of the National Anthem gave way to an evening to be remembered with addresses made by our Chairperson, SLS Founder Member, Chief Guest, Justice Shiranee Tilakawardane who spoke, among other issues the misuse of information technology by students and the suicides related to such incidence. The Director of the SLS Rural Programme gave her address followed by a visual presentation of ’40 Years- Where We Are Today’. A Cultural programme depicting the various dances of Sri Lanka during dinner was enjoyed by all under a starry night.

**Friday 10th October-** Dr. Lakshmi Vijayakumar openedthe session speaking on ‘The way forward’. Dr. Lakshmi kept us spell bound by her presentation urging us to think out of the box, initiating new and innovative concepts on how to reach callers and building our own strategies at our centres always keeping in mind sustainability. By the end of her session we were all raring to go ahead with plans for the next 40 years! Liz facilitated the first Workshop on ‘Exploring New Ways of Reaching our Callers & Potential Callers’. As expected Liz made us find the answers to all her questions! By the end of the session we were made more aware that our very own volunteers could be callers and do we as Befrienders give them the same support? BI facilitator Sriranjari ably assisted by her team chose the topic ‘Is Listening Only Enough? How Much Further Can We Go?’ A simple post card sent once a month with a caring message to callers who live alone or with no support was one way we could keep in touch with those with thoughts of suicide. It is cost effective and gives each of them a semblance of hope and something to look forward to every month. The last session of the day was presented by our Founder Member Nalini. The topic was ‘ The Skill of Recruitment’. This is a tremendous need, common to all our centres. With her vast experience on the subject she gave us an insight to the importance of planning ahead, targeting age groups, expectations from each group, the individual skills, availability and being open to change and unlearn.

Before sitting down to dinner we were entertained by delegates with multiple talents! Signing and dancing their hearts out, much to the delight of the audience.

**Saturday 11th October** Vivien Goh began her presentation by showing us the amazing journey taken by the Samaritans of Singapore and where they are today. SOS is held in high esteem by Government and Private Organisations. A truly remarkable journey we could all try to emulate. ‘The Aftermath of Suicide- Helping the Bereaved’ was the topic that Christine Wong presented to the packed auditorium. One of the ways in which SOS help and support their callers is ‘The Healing Bridge’- a support group for suicide survivors where the members of the Healing Bridge meet at SOS to share experiences, talk about feelings and try and cope with their grief. We were most encouraged by the possibility that we too could start a similar concept at our centres. Vivien and Christine assured us of their constant support. Dr. Lakshmi facilitated the next topic ‘Loss- A Constant Factor in Suicide’. Once again she described vivid encounters where different people react in different ways to cope with their feelings of loss. At times it felt so real we felt the same emotions. The interactive session gave us the opportunity to share our experiences and learn from each other. We were eagerly awaiting the next topic ‘New Ways to Support Challenges in the Future’ facilitated by Tanja. She had our attention from the moment she started. We were so keen to move forward using the technology offered to us today to help callers. Email, text and chat befriending was explained patiently and clearly. Tanja had gone to immense trouble to actually arrange for a ‘chat’ with a volunteer at her centre in Serbia! By the end of her session we were determined to start at least one new method to reach our callers. We had our last session for the day ‘Sexually Demanding Callers… Where Do We Draw The Line?’ facilitated by Srini and Anju from BI. The role play was mind-boggling and Srini if ever needs a new job should try to take on Bollywood! Anju too not to be left behind gave a start performance in her role play. Much was discussed and digested.

Fun and games where on the cards before dinner and it as a delight to see the old and the young joining hands to make the evening spin around with laughter and fun!!

**Sunday 12th October**- The final day of the Workshop began with the presentation ‘Reaching Out to the Most Vulnerable’. Suranjani and Dilan, volunteers from the Rural Programme gave a visual account from the inception of the Rural Programme in 1996 and to where it is today, reaching out to 90 villages in the North Western and Southern Provinces of Sri Lanka.

The final session of the Workshop was a group session conducted by the SLS Chairperson, Anura and BI president, Rajesh and the much loved and admired Dr. Lakshmi. We formed ourselves into large groups choosing our leader. We were given the task of planning a strategy for making the public more aware of our services and by doing so created enough motivation for them to see the need to join us as volunteers. We were given Rs. One million to set about this project. A panel of judges was announced. Everyone put their heads down to business! Each of the leaders gave a convincing and plausible account of various strategies. In the end the winners were from BI with Srini taking the lead role. The overall plan, partnering with Private and Governmental Organizations and well wishes was to make ‘safe havens’ for the destitute and mentally ill people who were rejected by society in different provinces of India. Only part of the money would be used for a publicity drive in making the public more aware of the free service, the crying need of forgotten people and duty towards humanity.

Messages of emotional farewells with gifts exchanged announced the end of four days of togetherness and fellowship. Numerous emails were received from delegates. Extracts read- “Thank you for the excellent work done by all volunteers and team of SLS for the excellent team work for making the workshop a memorable one. Special thanks to all those who made us feel so special”- “We learnt a lot of things which will make us grow in the future, thank you so much”- “The biggest impression is about the people, so warm, nice, friendly and open.”

**Pratheeksha Befriender Centre. Kerala, India.** At present our focus is to make our political leaders in India, specially Kerala, aware of the fact that more people die due to suicide, than those who die due to wars, natural calamities, and road accidents. We also want them to know the greater tragedy in India; the maximum incidence is in the age group of 25 to 50, the most productive years of one’s life. We want them to be aware of the laudable work that Samaritans & Befrienders Worldwide and their Associates do to minimize suicides. So we published a Brochure as a follow up to our activities of the World Suicide Prevention Day of 2014. It has been sent to all the centers and the Office Bearers of Befrienders India. You must have received it by now.

Our Trustees has been active during the preceding months, and have started building a Hall on the First Floor of our existing building. On completion, our meetings, training sessions etc will be held in this hall, so that our actual befriending activities are not disturbed in any way.

EmotionalSupport to the Suicidal

This is the prime objective of our movement. A summary of the talk given to us by our founder is as follows.

'In the evolutionary circle, human beings are the last to appear. If the whole evolution is condensed to 60 minutes, human beings only appeared in the 56th minute. The earlier step from animal to human beings was the appearance of Homo Erectus. Don’t worry about the exact sequence. The Homo Erectus started walking on its hind legs. This freed their arms, allowing them to use their arms to field primitive weapons. These precursors of human beings were not as strong or as agile as other animals like Whales, Elephants, Lions, Tigers etc. but the ability to use weapons gave them an edge. The law “ survival of the fittest ”worked in their favor.

All or most of you, have learned to use a Bicycle, which is essentially balancing yourself on two wheels. To be fit to go on the road on a bicycle, it takes about 10 days and many falls. This is in spite of the fact that you have genetically inherited the science of balancing from Homo Erectus.

But the time allotted for the initial training of newly selected Volunteers is three days! My initial response to this time stipulation was that we were being unrealistically optimistic. But on further thought and experience I realized, there was a method in what seemed to be madness. My Volunteer Director has given me strict time limits for this write up. So I will confine myself to one example only.

We have many in our locality whose business is buying gold, and converting it into jewelry. When some of their business repeatedly fails, they come to us. They come to us with the problem of repeated business failure. I know nothing about gold let alone making and selling jewelry, my knowledge being limited to the proverb “All that glitters is not gold.” But befriending comes to my rescue by saying forget about the solution to the problem, but concentrate on the feelings that the problem evokes in the caller. At the first look I know that he is sad, and after a few minutes of the session I realize he is suffering from loss of self-esteem. This is because I have seen sad people , with loss of self esteem before, I have been sad many times, and suffered loss of confidence, and so identification is easy and do not need any expertise, or knowledge. I am not required to find any solution but only help the caller explore options to cope, available to him. The decision what is the best option, is to be taken by the caller, and not myself. I am required only to be an active listener. This requires very little knowledge about the problem, only just being an active listener whom the caller can speak to, one who cares, one who will keep the interaction confidential, and never be judgemental. This requires no deep knowledge about the problem, and the technique of active listening can be taught in a short time. Chad Varah was no Einstein, but an ordinary sensible man who “CARED”. We are also required to be sensible, never making decisions but helping the caller to make decisions, and be there to listen, really caring for the caller. That is the miracle of befriending.

The Views expressed are that of the Editorial Board, and not necessarily of Befriender India.

All the volunteers of Pratheeksha send their Greetings. Volunteer Director Mukundan sends his personal Greetings.

**AUSTRALIA/ NEW ZEALAND REGION**

Wellington, New Zealand

The Wellington Centre is located in the capital city of New Zealand. It has been operating continuously for 50 years (June 2015). There are about 70 active volunteers and we take about 19,000 calls annually.

In New Zealand we have about 200 volunteers spread across six Centres. Each year they receive about 50,000 calls. A 24/7 service is provided by centres diverting calls to another one when they are not open. For a number of years now we have been exploring options to update our telephone systems in order to answer more calls, and have a more robust and sustainable system.

For the last 4 years we have been in discussions with the Samaritans Centres in Tasmania (1800km away) and Perth, Australia (5300km away). Our initial aim was to look at providing a uniform standard of training and procedures. More recently we have taken this a step further and are now looking at a much greater level of collaboration where we are aiming to share calls initially between Perth, Wellington and Tasmania. As Perth is 4/5 hours behind Wellington; Tasmania is 2 hours behind: we are anticipating that some of our overnight (and other) calls can be shared.

Telephone technology has advanced very quickly over the last few years and we are now exploring the option of having a “cloud based” system that will provide all of the facilities we require and enable room for expansion.