

Soldiers support Project “Petite Flamme” in the Congo

A Teddy Bear for Hélène!

Kinshasa . - Children are close to a soldier’s heart, and Edeltraud Stugholz knows it. For the past ten years the lady from near Paderborn has been director of the street children’s Project “Petite Flamme” in Kinshasa. Her ideas are good ones. Meanwhile, 20 men and women of the Bundeswehr have come to the same opinion: in Africa they became sponsors. These Germans belong to the EUFOR RD CONGO contingent. It is providing security for free elections in that African country.

“Petite Flamme” provides care for around 1200 children and young people in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They get a good education and vocational training, one daily meal, medical care, and learn a trade. It costs German sponsors in Kinshasa 18 Euros a month when they decide to support a child.

Need is the Mother of Invention

It is often “endlessly difficult” to be able to help the children. Edeltraud Stugholtz recalls for instance the two boys Gaylord and Jean-Paul, both now 18 years old. Clever as 10 year-olds, they used to waylay cars and order the drivers to turn off the motor. One of the two boys would crawl under the car and wet the spark plugs. That gave them a chance to give the car a push to restart it – for a small charge, of course. While Edeltraud Stugholtz tells the story her eyes shine with amusement.

She is a friendly person, whose heart beat not just for children, but also for her Catholic faith within the Focolare Movement, an comopolitan community housed in a modest, clean, whitewashed house in the N’dolo neighborhood.

Exploited, Rejected, Forgotten

Outside, misery is everywhere to be seen. Each child needs help. But the girls and boys of the street gangs often just steal one from the other, sexually abuse the weakest, and spend their meager spoils on drugs. No one can avoid them. As AIDS orphans they have no parents. Many of the children and youngsters were simply chased off by their mothers. But the worst comes later: any child whose own mother chases him away is held to have the Devil in him, and will inevitably live and die on the streets.

Edeltraud Stugholtz continues with the tale of Gaylord and Jean-Paul. She had talked to the boys a couple of times. Soon they were standing at the gates of the religious community, proud and provoking, in truth, but curious also. The regular lunches together with Gaylord and Jean-Paul were preceded by a process called re-cooperation, a kind of help towards re-socialization. That took three years. Meanwhile, the young men are 18, high-school graduates, and in training to become electricians. They were able to eat, get medical care and, at first, go to primary school in

Kinshasa. The cost of their education amounted to 70 dollars a year. “This is investment in the country,” Edeltraud Stugholtz is sure.

To have a Heart for Hélène

The German contingent was convinced. That included Lieutenant Colonel Armin Kranz (40), who works as a translator for German, English and French.

He says, “I would like to help people in Kinshasa personally, especially the children who are in such need.” The reserve officer from the Federal Language Office has become the sponsor for Hélène, a little 5 year-old girl. The two meet occasionally, and now the Mann from Hürth has something encouraging in store for the little one.

He asked one of his fellow soldiers to buy a really big teddy bear in Germany and bring it with him: “Now the child will always have something to cuddle.”

Author: Karl-Heinz Smuda

Image captions:

Image 1:

They feel well taken care of – and have fun too:
Children in Kinshasa

Image 2:

Tired after a strenuous day: Monique, 4 years old