**Annual Report of MEPO and the House of Flowers - 2013**

The fall of 2012 marked the ten year anniversary of the inception of the House of Flowers orphanage as an innovative Montessori-based home and education environment. The end of 2012 was also, however, a time of extreme financial stress, and the existence of the House of Flowers was at stake. For much of the past year, the NGO PARSA had taken the House of Flowers under its auspices in order to provide greater financial stability. This had included the establishment of a nursery in the House of Flowers, as well as making strong connections with Mr. Abdullah Sayed Hashimi, the director of orphanages in Kabul.

However, despite these positive developments, the financial status of the House continued to be extremely tenuous under PARSA, and substantial debt had built up in order to meet the expenses of the House and its children.

In October 2012, Allison Lide, co-founder of the House of Flowers, visited Kabul for the first time in six years. During her month-long visit, she was able to witness the excellent work of the teachers and staff and saw how they had maintained a strong grounding in Montessori principles despite only having long-distance support over the years. Their dedication and skill reconfirmed the value and importance of what the House of Flowers was providing for its children, and the results seen in the children’s development and progress was evident. During this time, Allison gave refresher trainings on Montessori education and child development principles to the staff of the House of Flowers. She and the staff also worked with Mr. Hashimi to conduct a pilot training program for some staff of the Alluaddin City Orphanage, since Mr. Hashimi was vitally interested in adopting the model of the House of Flowers to the orphanages under his management. This training was run by the staff of the House of Flowers , who shared their experiences with working in a Montessori environment.

The training was very well-received and had great potential for follow-through, but unfortunately the funds did not materialize for such a program. In addition, funds needed to keep the House of Flowers also were not materializing under PARSA. So in October 2012, the decision was made to revert the House of Flowers back to MEPO in collaboration with HEWAD, effective January 2013. In the last quarter of 2012 PARSA secured a $20,000 grant from the Linda Norgrove Foundation, and this enabled the debts to be paid and the House to operate for the rest of 2012 until MEPO would resume control. HEWAD assisted in restabilization of the House finances by renegotiating the House rent at $1200 per month, which was highly competitive considering the size and location of the house itself. HEWAD also revised the House operating expenses to reflect the tightened budget, reducing the budget from $7000 per month to $5000 per month.

At this time, the House of Flowers was home to 33 children and had 9 staff members.

The Norgrove Foundation grant money covered the last quarter of 2012. During that time, MEPO undertook an intensive fundraising campaign in order to have funds ready for the House by January. To this end, MEPO dramatically improved its outreach and communications systems in November and December of 2012 while also planning for a financial overhaul of the House of Flowers program:

* MEPO launched a completely overhauled website in December, updating pictures, stories and links, and providing a way to regularly post updates. The budget was transparently shared on the website, communicating the urgent need for funds. A membership system was set up, encouraging donors to commit to monthly donations to provide stability and continuity of income to the project.
* With the overhaul, MEPO established a credit card payment system on the website. This was a huge step for the organization, and has facilitated over $23,000 of donations over the past year.
* MEPO reached out through its email list in a broad and urgent appeal for funds. This was highly successful, engaging both dedicated donors from the past as well as new donors. A number of new organizations got involved, including the Kabul Rotary Club, Nove Onlus (an Italian NGO), Canadian Women for Women of Afghanistan. Teachers and schools from the global Montessori community conducted fundraisers and donated to the House of Flowers.
* MEPO took over the House of Flowers Facebook page (it had been formed under PARSA) and began posting regularly. (Today the site has over 900 ‘friends’. )
* Under PARSA, the monthly budget had been around $7000, but this had been unattainable. Under MEPO’s renewed role and HEWAD’s management, the monthly budget was tightened starting in January 2013, limiting expenses to $5000 per month. This was an extremely austere budget, but was necessary until MEPO was able to raise funds and determine if the project was indeed still sustainable. The top budget priority was the basic needs of the children, such as food and clothing; this meant that with the reduced budget, the staff salaries remained very low.
* In January, MEPO and HEWAD made the joint decision to suspend the nursery program which had begun under PARSA. It was agreed that the funds were not sufficient to support such a venture, since more staff were needed in order to properly care for infants. Placements for the infants in the nursery were found with other NGOs, and that part of the House of Flowers program closed down. Right now there are no plans to revive it.
* Through the intensive outreach and communications effort, by January 2013 enough funds had been raised to cover costs for the first quarter. By March, enough funds had come in to make it possible to increase the budget to a more realistic level, giving the staff some critically needed salary increases, since they had received no raises for two years and had shown incredible dedication during very difficult times. In addition, the cost of living in Kabul had increased dramatically. In March, MEPO increased the budget to $5800 per month.
* For the remainder of the year, the financial stability of the House continued to improve. Money was transferred from the US headquarters of MEPO to the House every 2 months on average, ensuring that there was a consistent cash flow. Some donors directly sent money to the HEWAD bank account in Afghanistan as well. The House management submitted quarterly reports of expenses, showing that the budget was being adhered to and all needs were being met.
* Some additional expenses were covered by very generous individuals and organizations who provided in-kind support, including new sheets and blankets for all the children, sets of books in Dari, Pushto and English, repair of the house plumbing, and repair of broken windows that were blown out in a nearby bomb blast in the end of 2013.

**Financial Report**

From January to March 2013, the monthly budget of the House of Flowers was $5000. After March, the budget was increased to $5800 per month.

Below is the average breakdown of expenses per month.

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| **Monthly Average Expenses 2013** | | |
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| **Salaries**  (1 manager, 2 teachers, 1 cook, 2 cleaning staff, 3 guards/night staff) | | $ 2,350.00 |
| **Food** | | $ 1,500.00 |
| **Rent** | | $ 1,200.00 |
| **Misc Supplies** (includes office and school supplies, clothes and shoes, medicines, cleaning supplies, hygiene supplies, kitchen equipment, etc) | | $ 300.00 |
| **Energy** (electricity bill, fuel for generator and heaters) | | $ 350.00 |
| **House maint.** (septic drainage, house repairs) | | $ 100.00 |
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| **TOTAL** | | **$ 5,800.00** |

These are averages, since of course the amounts per category varied with the season and the needs of the children at various times of year.

**Income Breakdown**

Over 2013, sufficient funds were raised to meet all of the financial needs of the House of Flowers, with some carryover into 2014 to ensure smooth continuity of operation and the ability to increase the budget. Below is a breakdown of sources of funds over the year, and total income:

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| --- | --- |
| ***Overview and Breakdown from 2013*** | |
| Individual donors (1-3 times each, average $300) | $ 49,100 |
| Consistent donors, members (monthly) | $ 13,455 |
| Organizations and fundraisers | $ 24,600 |
| Foundations (grants) | $ 18,500 |
|  |  |
| **Total** | **$ 105,655** |
| **Expenses from 2013**  ($5800 x 12 months) | 69,000 |
| **Carry-over to 2014**  (projected through May 2014 with monthly budget of $6400) | 36,655 |

**Projected for 2014**

* Monthly budget: $6400 (9% increase from 2013)
* Annual budget: $76,800
* Unfunded portion for 2014: $40,145

**Anticipated funds to cover the unfunded portion:**

* CW4WA: $10,000, with potentially another $10,000
* LNF: $15,000
* Donations: $30,000

**Summary of Events of 2013**

One of the most exciting events in 2013 was that the House of Flowers had its first high school graduate. Razia and her two sisters had been the first residents of the House of Flowers. In early 2013 Razia graduated from high school and passed her university entrance exam. She was then accepted in the Faculty of Education of Kabul University. This is an incredible accomplishment, considering that only 50% of students graduate from high school, and only 10% of them pass the university exam. (source: *The New York Times)*

At the same time, she and her sisters had left the House in November 2013 to live with their father, who after ten difficult years finally felt able to care for them. So Razia, Nadia (age 17) and Shukria (age 13) left the House of Flowers. But since it had been truly their home and the staff their family for ten years of their childhood, they continue to visit regularly and call the staff of the House often. In addition, MEPO secured a scholarship for Razia through A More Balanced World (a US organization) and provides those funds to her to cover her books, transportation and food costs while at university.

**Cultural Events**

Our goal is to provide a well-rounded existence for the children of the House of Flowers, not limiting their world to just school and home. This means providing opportunities to meet and communicate with different people, to explore the arts, and to become aware of the wider world through activities such as those described below:

**Events in Kabul, at the House of Flowers**

* **Activities with the New Kabul Rotary Club** – The New Kabul Rotary Club invited the children and staff of the House of Flowers to make a presentation at one of their meetings. They then decided to adopt the House as one of their projects hosted a bowling party at a bowling alley in Kabul as a fund raiser for the House of Flowers. Many of the children went and had their first experience bowling. They met many members of the Rotary Club and had a wonderful time. (February 2013)
* **Art Exhibition, Constellation** Some years ago, a French organization called Constellation conducted an art project with the children of the House of Flowers. Upon reconnecting with the group, the project was revived through the efforts of members of the New Rotary Club and an Afghan art gallery owner. After doing art with the children at the House, their work was exhibited at The Galleria in Kabul and the reception was also a fund raiser. The children again attended the event, experiencing a world of art and culture. (December 2013)
* **Filming for Montessori documentary** Anna Lee, a Montessori educator in the US, began working on a documentary film that would highlight Montessori projects around the world. She requested permission to include the House of Flowers as one of six highlighted programs globally. An Afghan videographer visited the House and filmed the children there. Besides the excitement of being filmed, the experience of meeting an Afghan woman in the profession of videography was an excellent experience for the children, to broaden their perspective on what is possible in the world of work. (August 2013)
* **Filming for a Canadian Broadcasting Company documentary on girls education** Through our contact with the organization Canadian Women for Women of Afghanistan, journalist Melissa Fung visited the House of Flowers to include it in her documentary on the state of girls education in Afghanistan. The House of Flowers was included as an example of effective education serving girls. (May 2013)
* **Penpals** The House of Flowers children exchanged letters with a Montessori school in New Hampshire. Although this kind of exchange is quite challenging due to the postal service inconsistencies, when it does work it is very exciting for the children on both ends to be in contact with each other. (Jan. 2013)
* **Celebrations**: **Teachers Day, Girls Education Day, Womens Day, Fahim’s wedding** Celebrations are a large part of life in the House of Flowers. The children love to organize these annual programs, including poetry, skits, dramas and singing, while festively decorating the rooms with balloons, ribbons and signs. In addition, a momentous event this year was the marriage of Fahim, the House manager. He has been with the House of Flowers since its first day, and is known to all the children as Uncle Fahim. The occasion of his wedding was enormously exciting, and he hosted an engagement party with the children at the House of Flowers as well as hosting their attendance at the wedding. The children participate in all aspects of life of the staff, including births and funerals as well as weddings. The House of Flowers is truly a family, with all of the cycles of life being shared among them.
* **“Family” Visits to the House** The warm and inclusive environment of the House of Flowers can be seen daily, but also is evident by the number of staff members and children who come back to visit the House of Flowers even after leaving. This year the House received visits from the former cook, as well as children who had lived in the House some years earlier. The staff reported that these children are doing well, are still in school and are healthy and strong. In addition, the House regularly receives foreign visitors, who love to spend time in the House with the children.

**House of Flowers Events Outside of Kabul**

* **Healing Afghanistan book** Ten years ago, a photographer named Judy Duchesne-Peckham visited Kabul with a small team from California. In November 2013, she published a hardcover book of her photography dedicated to the House of Flowers. Her book included photos of the children as well as essays by Dr. Mostafa Vaziri and Allison Lide, co-founders of the House, as well as staff members Amanullah Nasrat, Inayatullah Mujaddidi and Fahim Ibrahimi. The profits of the book sales go towards the House of Flowers. (November 2013)
* **Montessori conference presentation** In July 2013, Allison presented a paper at the International Montessori Congress entitled “Channeling the Natural Energies of Resilience” which explicated the structure of the House of Flowers based on Montessori model, and described the successes of the House based on the children’s mental health, energy levels, and academic school performance. Her talk was well-received, and was attended by a renowned cognitive neuroscientist (Dr. Adele Diamond) who confirmed afterwards the effectiveness of a Montessori environment for children with traumatic backgrounds.

**Transitions and Growing Up**

*Razia* – Age 19, freshman in college. Attending university, living with her father and 2 sisters, who are still in school.

*Waheed* – age 17, grade 11. Worked at a part-time job and took computer classes for one year, then in late 2013 moved back to help his mother who lives in a refugee camp.

*Basir* – age 17, grade 10. Basir’s education was lagging behind by several years when he came to the House of Flowers at age 13. Now he has almost caught up, and he has been working at a part-time job for the past year, slowly becoming more confident and independent.

*Obaid* – age 17. Obaid was at the House of Flowers from 2003 to 2010. Partially handicapped by polio, we learned that Obaid was recently hired by the International Red Cross in Kabul at a facility that assists physically disabled Afghans.

**Challenges Over the Year and To Come**

**House Repairs**

In Afghanistan, renters’ rights are minimal. As a result, when the plumbing of the House broke down this summer, we as renters were responsible for repairs. This was very costly (about $3000) so we were incredibly grateful to the group Canadian Women for Women of Afghanistan who paid for those repairs since they were not in our budget.

**Security**

The security of the children and staff are always our first priority. The children are escorted to and from school every day by one of the male staff at the House of Flowers, and the staff makes sure to keep cordial relations with all of the neighbors. But in the morning of December 2013, a bomb exploded near the House of Flowers. It was a blessing that no one was injured, but the blast did blow out several windows in the house, and was very scary for the children and staff. So the staff is preparing for an even more unpredictable future, and making sure everyone in the House knows what to do in the case of emergencies.

**Looking Towards 2014**

**Status of the children as of December 2013**

Currently there are 25 children living in the House: 20 boys and 5 girls. Over the last few months, some of the girls of the House of Flowers have been taken to their provincial homes by their extended relatives. As a result, there is space in the House for more girls. We have space for 5 more girls and are actively reaching out to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to find if there are other girls who need a safe place to live and receive an education.

**Security**

Since the situation in 2014 with the troop pull-out is unpredictable, the House of Flowers staff is already thinking of how to be prepared. They have begun preparedness plans for what to do in the House in the event of bombs or other security issues. Their plans include where to seek shelter in the House and preparing the children in case there are emergencies.

The staff has requested that outings across the city with the children be curtailed until the situation is more clear. They are concerned for the children’s safety, and we will always defer to their wisdom and decisions when it comes to such things.

**Budget Increase**

We are anticipating that the projected monthly budget for 2014 will need to be increased by about 10% to reflect the increased cost of living in Kabul. In addition, there are some house expenses that are expected such as painting of the interior and new mattresses for the children’s beds.

**The Children’s Futures**

As the children grow older, their educational needs change. We are hoping to begin collaborating with a new NGO in Kabul that will provide vocational training and business skills to the older children to supplement their academic education. This NGO is currently getting established in Kabul, so hopefully by the spring of 2014 some collaboration will begin.

**Expanding the Model**

We will also be looking for additional ways to share the House of Flowers Montessori model with other schools and orphanages. There is potential for collaboration with the Italian NGO Nove Onlus as they work to raise funds for a large-scale training program for the city orphanages that would draw upon the House of Flowers Montessori program as a model.

**Conclusion**

In summary, 2013 has been a pivotal and momentous year for MEPO and the House of Flowers. Over the year, the House of Flowers has arisen from a point of near closure to reach a level of stability and vibrancy thanks to literally hundreds of donors and the incredible dedication and competency of the House of Flowers staff. MEPO has also become stronger and has attracted more donors than ever before. More people are involved in the support of these children than in the entire history of the House of Flowers, and this positive energy has been extremely powerful. We are looking forward to the coming year with its new potential and progress and the new paths that will certainly open up to all of us.