

MEDIA RELEASE

On a first field trip with Goodwill Ambassador Pau Gasol

August 2005 - Thandiwe School for the disabled in the rural KwaZulu Natal (KZN) municipality of Nkandla is home to boys and girls, aged from 2-16, with a range of physical and cognitive disabilities. But that doesn't stop the children from having a good time with a ball.

When it comes to play time, everyone is out on the dusty playfield. And when the game is being hosted by 2.13 meter tall UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Pau Gasol, NBA basketball player from the Memphis Grizzlies, then the fun really begins for the entire school.

"They are playing with a basketball, but the children are calling all the shots. They are playing their favourite ball games of rugby, soccer and basketball all at the same time," said an amused city councillor and school governing body member, Mr. B.V. Khanyile, who watched with glee as the mixed genre games delighted the children. "This is a very special day for our school," he said.

To the rest of the UNICEF team travelling with Pau on his first field trip as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF, it was clear throughout the five-day visit that children couldn't get enough of the young basketball player, nor he of them.

The twenty-five year-old Spanish sports star, one of the youngest on UNICEF's roster of world famous achievers who have donated their time to helping change the lives of children, came to South Africa to learn about how the HIV and AIDS pandemic had affected children, visit communities and talk to children and families themselves about their lives.

Earlier in the week he had done homework with foster children in Pinetown, had a briefing on paediatric AIDS from the medical team at Prince Mshiyeni Hospital and line danced with children at Khalipa School in Durban. Now it was on to a rural community.

Nkandla is home to many of the orphans in South Africa who have lost their parents to HIV and AIDS. Here, unemployment stands at 76 per cent and locals say at the current HIV and AIDS infection rate of 38 per cent, it is getting worse. But that's not unusual in a province like KZN, which represents about 20 per cent of South Africa's total population of 40.5 million; has child population of 4 million, almost half of the entire population of the province. KZN also has the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the

country among women 15-29 years, coupled with very high levels of violence against women and children.

Those grim figures are what brought Mr. Gasol and a team from the Spanish National Committee for UNICEF to South Africa and to this hilly area of subsistence farming and seasonal agriculture, part of the Ekukhanyeni (meaning place of light) Tribal Authority.

UNICEF South Africa has been working closely with the municipality, community leaders and children themselves over a three-year period, to help develop a local plan of action (LPA) that prioritizes the needs of children and establishes a sustainable budget to support children's development in health education and protection in the municipality's overall integrated development plan (IDP).

In the life of a municipality, the pioneering work to improve service delivery to children that's going on here is still in its early stages, but the progress has made Nkandla into something of a model development community.

According to Deputy Mayor Zulu, now both government and NGOs are taking a closer look, and the provincial and national programmes of action for children have requested UNICEF to replicate its model development, known as "Municipalities Fit for Children" in KZN, Eastern Cape and Limpopo. Once the models have been honed, monitored and evaluated, the work will be rolled out in other municipalities across the country.

"I am jumping; I am running;" chanted the adorable two and three year olds at the modest Phokathwayo Crèche in Siqhamuka, as volunteer teacher Ms. Ntsiki tried to make an English lesson fun for the very young Zulu speaking children, several of whom were orphans living with relatives.

Ever the youngster at heart, the Memphis-based star joined in the lesson and was quickly surrounded by the curious and friendly children. He listened as a local translator related the children's individual stories, described the pictures that adorned their classroom wall, and explained life in the picturesque, but dirt poor rural community.

With the help of volunteers and UNICEF NGO partner TREE (Training Resources in Early Childhood Development) the local community has built a one-room schoolhouse for the thirty children in the school, moving them out of the leaky wooden shack across the street that had housed them before. The Tribal Authority is also working with TREE to build and train community ECD practitioners for five more early childhood classrooms for the area's children.

Thanking the municipality for the opportunity to observe South African initiatives to protect, care for and support orphans and vulnerable children, Mr. Gasol said, "What I have learnt here, I will share with the rest of the world."

With just one last engagement left – a basketball clinic with a group of Pretoria youngsters trying out to make their province's "A" team and the upcoming South African national youth championships - before flying off the Barcelona on Saturday 13 August, he asserted, "I love this work this my job."