

## Cashel Community School and The Niall Mellon Township Trust

This charity began when Niall Mellon, a Dublin property developer went on his honeymoon to Cape Town, South Africa in 2004. He was shocked by the dire poverty and inhumane living conditions of millions of black and coloured people around the city. He decided he wanted to assist in some way and met community representatives from one township called Imizamo Yethu. He asked how he could help. Proper living conditions, rather than money, was their request.

He decided to gather together Irish tradespeople to take to Cape Town as volunteers to build houses. This was the first of what has now become an annual Building Blitz. In 2007 **Cashel Community School became the first school in Ireland to take part in the Building Blitz.**

Four students were chosen to travel to Africa and work physically to improve the lives of those less fortunate. Final selection was by interview and then we began fundraising the required €24,000. They were accompanied by Woodwork teacher, Brendan Ryan, who had been a volunteer on the 2005 and 2006 Building Blitz trips and Religion teacher, Caitríona Ryan who spent 7 weeks in 2006 on volunteer work in India. We did this as a school group rather than individually, which might prove difficult, for the selected students. After months of preparing and fundraising we were all glad when November '07 arrived and we flew to Cape Town to begin work on the building blitz.

Along with all the other volunteers, our students were both shocked and amazed by the trip. The shock came from seeing first hand the poverty and living conditions of thousands and thousands of township residents. Seeing fellow humans living in awful, tiny shacks made from scrap galvanise and waste wood, with no toilet, no running water and many with no electricity, was a real eye opener. From meeting and talking to township residents we learned that these people really have nothing. Low immune systems, very poor nutrition, high levels of disease including HIV, and lack of education are only some of the daily burdens carried by millions of township residents.

The shacks, because of the galvanise, became like ovens during the warm weather and then are unable to keep out the water during heavy rain. No photos, DVD's or newspaper articles can properly prepare one for seeing this in person. Our students were amazed by how a group of people working together can "make a difference". Irish builders and tradespeople are joined by people of all ages and backgrounds to physically work as hard as possible for seven days to change these people's lives.

When our students returned to school immediately after the trip they spoke to each year group showing pictures and video clips of their experiences. During these presentations, from students to students, you'd hear a pin drop. These demonstrations highlighted the poverty that exists in our world, while showing exactly how the money fundraised in our school has improved the lives of many poor South Africans.

Following the success of our school's first trip we have taken six students each year on the '08, '09 and '10 Niall Mellon Township Building Blitz'. The primary reason for our schools involvement is helping those less fortunate than ourselves, but we have found that the entire student body of 800, have now an increased awareness of poverty and an increased willingness to help others. The 22 students who have represented Cashel Community School on the trips have obviously been the lucky ones. They have all spoke on returning of how it was such a life changing experience.

Cashel Community School has fundraised over €150,000 for the Niall Mellon Township Trust over the last four years. This would not be possible but for many people. Teacher Caitriona Ryan, who travelled on 3 blitz' and teacher Marie White who travelled this year, have promoted volunteerism and highlighted poverty along with their fellow RE teachers in class. Caitriona and Marie have also worked extremely hard on a small Niall Mellon T. T. Fundraising Committee in Cashel Community School. This group of a dozen teachers have given up much of their free time, working extremely hard to raise the required money each year.

Our school's Student Council along with all our students have really bought into the Niall Mellon Township Trust, and have both physically helped to raise the money, while also personally contributing.

All our staff have co-operated and encouraged our efforts, but without the kind permission, encouragement and assistance of our school management this would all be in vain. We are lucky and grateful that our principal Mr. Eddie Morrissey and deputy principal Mrs. Margaret Skehan, see the benefits of our Charity work for all involved, and support us each year.

If our combined efforts each year were to improve the life of only one child, then we all think it would be worth it. However through our small involvement in the fantastic work of the Niall Mellon Township Trust, we know that it is not one life that is changed for the better each year, but hundreds of lives. Since the charity began it's work in 2002, over 12,500 houses have been built with over 80,000 people now in houses which have running water, a toilet, safe electricity. It is our great privilege in Cashel Community School to be involved in this fantastic and life changing work.