

THE STUDENT SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

by Maurice Forster

The Eighty Club Melbourne Inc. (ECM) Student Sponsorship Program is an enduring effort to reduce the high rate of unemployment in the Burgher community in Sri Lanka by providing finances to pay for education and training courses.

The club was in its formative years and by the first constitution committed to enhance education and employment skills. The April '84 'Newsletter' reports a scheme for funding the training of stenographers. Newsletter 19 in '86 proudly reports: "Concerning our Education Fund you will be glad to know that five youngsters are having their needs met ...". Unfortunately the Education Fund was closed when the ECM sought taxation exemption. Education was not acknowledged as a charity by the tax authorities at the time, and 'assistance to education' had to be deleted from the club's aims. The money in the Education Fund was donated to St Nicholaas' Home and for some years educational assistance was dropped. A few members continued to assist students privately.

In 1996 the writer - at the time Secretary of the ECM - appealed for sponsors, by distributing fliers at functions and by an article in the Newsletter of December which said in part:

"Volunteers Please: There are many youngsters and children who can be helped .. with education and job training ... there is no reason why interested club members may not get involved.' So began the Child Sponsorship Scheme, which was a self funded program totally independent of the ECM and run by the writer with the help of several intermediaries in S.L. Later after the Tax Department allowed education as an acceptable charity the ECM again included education in its aims and, the privately run program was returned to the ECM. The name of the program was changed to the more appropriate Student Sponsorship Program.

Sponsors register with the Coordinator and select 'sponsorees' from the students recommended by the DBU. The sponsor pays \$15 per month for a student in secondary education and \$ 20 for a student at the GCE 'A' level, in tertiary education or vocational training. Students receive payments graduated to their level of scholarship at rates currently varying from RS.700 to Rs 1,800 per month. Their needs; for books, special courses, spectacles and medical expenses are paid from reserves which accrue from donations and gains in the transfer of currency.

Casting my mind back I think of two girls who came into the scheme in their very early teens. One a shanty dweller became an airhostess, the other got a secretarial position in a mercantile office. I think too of three boys; one became a computer programmer, another completed an economics degree and the third was employed in a shipping company, built a modest home for himself and his parents using timber off-cuts. The earnings of these children have made it unnecessary for their parents to seek ECM assistance. A few years ago in desperation at the lack of any response from a little girl and her mother I asked the DBU welfare officer to investigate and if necessary stop payment. It turned out that the mother was illiterate and the child mute. That child now attends the deaf & dumb school because the program pays her travel costs. Most recently we had a girl who is almost certain to gain entrance into Medical College. All this happens because of the generosity of sponsors.

We now have 129 students sponsored by III sponsors; about a third of whom are not members of the club, although many sponsors become aware of the work of The Club through the Sponsorship program and eventually become members. The program has attracted several young sponsors, the children of our members. With the bridging of generations comes hope for continuity of a program that one young sponsor called "a wonderful and inspiring program".

(Excerpt from 21st Anniversary Souvenir, Eighty Club Melbourne, September 2003)

Maurice Forster was the driving force behind the formation of the SSP and was program coordinator till 2007.