

NGO develops durable desks for schools

By Herbert Mutugwi

A MUTARE-BASED non-governmental and non-profit carpentry training institution has come up with a novel concept that promises to revolutionise provision of furniture in poor schools in rural areas.

The Zvakasimba outreach programme launched in 1996 by the Africa Self-Help Programme has so far helped 105 poor schools in Manicaland according to ASAP director, Mr Tom Arsenault.

For the 58 schools in Zimunya-Marange, 22 in Chibwe, Chipinge South and 25 in Nyanga North, procuring enough furniture to comfortably sit children during lessons would have remained an elusive dream.

In Shurugwi, Midlands, where ASAP has a work-

ing relationship with a carpentry co-operative, a number of schools have benefitted. Sixteen schools each in Uzumba-Maramba-Pfungwe and Kotwa area of Mudzi are having their furniture assembled.

The Zvakasimba outreach programme combines training of local skilled carpenters and provision of tools, precut kits of the desk bench, teachers' chair and desk which are then assembled on site at the schools.

The four-seater heavy duty durable "Zvakasimba desk bench" was designed at the ASAP Tinovaka training centre in Mutare and the carpenters undergo a four-week rigorous training course before they can start assembling the furniture.

A full kit of the desk comprises timber cut to size, dowels, screws, nails,

glass paper, glue and varnish.

Arsenault says ASAP sources for funds from donors who are prepared to fund furniture provision in schools in an area of their choice after which local authorities and their communities are requested to provide names of schools which they feel deserve assistance.

Each school then selects a carpenter living within the community with existing skills who then attends the training course.

"The programme is designed to improve the existing skills of the carpenters in furniture making. The training includes small business training because most of the carpenters are self-employed," he says. "The

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idea is to train a local person to become a better resource for the community."

On completing training, the carpenters are given a set of tools which include drill base and bit, hammer, screw driver, tape measure, plane, sash clap, brush for vanishing, two chisels, mallet and tenon saw to use for assembling the school furniture.

The tools remain the property of the schools which selected the carpenters for training but the carpenters can use the tools for their own private work for free.

Arsenault says a total of 85 carpenters in addition to a number of woodwork teachers have received training since the programme began and if donor fatigue does not set in, ASAP plans to take the programme to the country's poorest province, Matabeleland South later this year.

Donors who have funded some of the outreach programmes include Plan International, New Zealand High Commission, British High Commission, the United States Embassy and Solon Foundation of Switzerland who recently appointed Arsenault and his wife Elizabeth as their country representatives in Zimbabwe.

Although largely a side-show for ASAP whose main thrust was to train young school leavers the art of timber frame construction of houses, the programme is slowly becoming the main focus of the American couple who mooted ASAP because of its high success rate with impoverished rural schools.

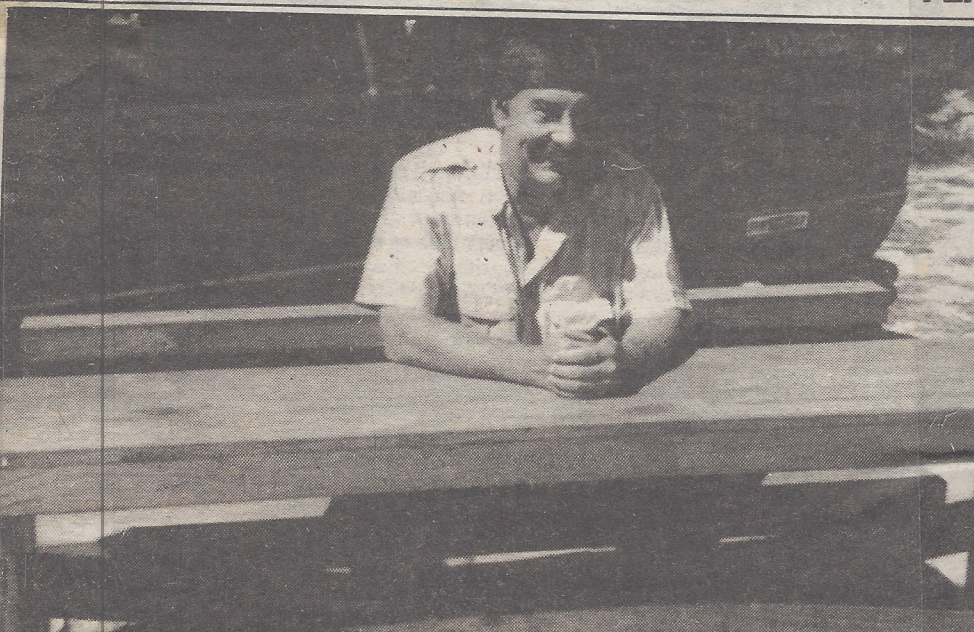
The love for Africa of the couple, former teachers in Swaziland under the Peace Corp Volunteer Programme whose contracts expired in 1991, led them start ASAP to enable them to come back to the continent.

The couple settled in Zimbabwe because of the universal use of English in the country, and in Mutare because of the abundance of timber in the border town and prospects of ex-

programme into Mozambique.

Training of school leavers in timber frame construction continues at a much smaller scale because building such houses was found to be no less expensive than conventional building using bricks, says Arsenault who helped in the drawing up of regulations in the building of such houses by the Ministry of Public Construction and National Housing.

THE MANICA POST, FRIDAY MAY 8, 1998



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