

A Life Less Ordinary

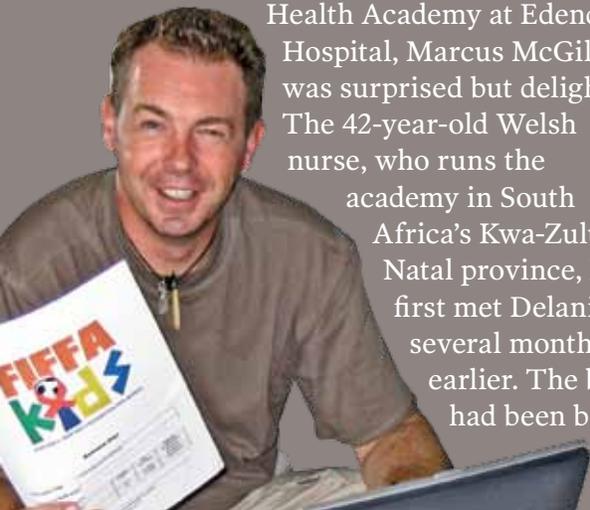
HIV is widespread among South Africa's young people. But a nurse from Chepstow is using his medical experience—and football—to help them get the treatment they so desperately need

MORE THAN A GAME

BY CRISPIN ANDREWS

In January this year, when Delani* turned up for treatment at the Whizzkids United Health Academy at Edendale Hospital, Marcus McGilvray was surprised but delighted.

The 42-year-old Welsh nurse, who runs the academy in South Africa's Kwa-Zulu Natal province, had first met Delani several months earlier. The boy had been born ▶



*SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT PRIVACY



◀ HIV-positive and was refusing to take his medication to get back at his parents for passing on the disease. But of course, by leaving his immune system exposed, Delani was most likely to hurt himself.

“Delani hadn’t taken his drugs for over a year,” says Marcus. “But all of a sudden, here he was. He hadn’t been asked by his parents to come along. He’d made his own choice.”

So what made him change his mind? The answer is football.

Delani had originally come to the academy for coaching sessions on its football pitch—a welcome change from the dusty scrubland near his home. But his experience there started to change his self-destructive persona. “He made friends who liked him for who he was,” Marcus says, “people who looked up to him because he was good at football.”

No longer just defined by his illness, Delani now felt comfortable enough at the academy to enrol in one of its treatment programmes.

Three months on, he still turns up weekly to take his medication, is in reasonable health, and has joined a peer support group.

DELANI IS ONE OF THOUSANDS OF South African youngsters Marcus and his academy have helped come to terms with, and get treatment for, HIV in the last few years—thanks to an innovative mix of football and health outreach.

The former London clinic worker moved to Africa in October 2002 with his partner Nicola, a paediatrics expert, to set up an HIV clinic in Ghana. They then moved to South Africa to work with Kwa-Zulu Natal’s regional government

on the diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

In June 2004, though, the couple split up, with Nicola moving to Zimbabwe to set up a children’s clinic. “We’d both been working seven days a week, and didn’t have much of a relationship left,” Marcus admits.

His response was to throw himself into his work even more. “I’d come to Africa because I just kept thinking about all the people who were dying of Aids,” he says. “I didn’t want to retire in 30 years’ time without at least having had a go at helping them.”

Marcus took a job developing training for Kwa-Zulu Natal health professionals in the use of HIV drugs. But some 45 per cent of adults and 16 per cent of adolescents in the region are HIV-positive, and Marcus really wanted to work on prevention.

“Giving people advice and support before they’re infected is what saves lives,” he says.

THE GROUP WHO REALLY NEEDED to be targeted was children. So Marcus asked for a day off a week to set up a street clinic in a small town called Mariannhill. Only a handful of kids came to the first session, but Marcus noticed many more were playing football on a sun-baked field nearby. On a hunch, he asked a local community leader if he



Coaching for life: Marcus leads another session

could get 40 youths to a municipal pitch for a game of football at 3pm the following Monday. Four hundred turned up.

The matches continued for the next few weeks and Marcus realised that once the young people got to know and trust

him, the sessions were a great chance for them to speak about their health and other problems in a safe environment.

“Someone would always confide in you, usually at the end of the session,” he says. “You’d hear stories of rape, physical abuse and violence.” Marcus would also learn which young-

sters were HIV-positive and encourage them to get the treatment and support they so desperately needed.

He developed the sessions into a fully fledged programme called Whizz-kids United and, over the next four years, took it to schools and community groups around Edendale—and eventually into South Africa’s Western Cape and North West provinces. ▶

“Advice before people are infected is what saves lives”

Sport with a goal: a training session at Edendale, 2010





Not just football: education is also crucial to the work of Whizzkids United

◀ In one of the programme's exercises, the children were asked to play without any goals. "After a while, they'd complain about it—that they were running around in circles with nothing to aim for," explains Marcus. "So we asked 'What is better, a life with or without goals?' The game became an analogy for life."

The programme also emphasised the importance of working together to overcome challenges—and the importance of a goalkeeper to protect the team was used to explain the need for contraception to protect couples from HIV.

Both sexes took part and, says Marcus, "Girls began to understand the peer pressure on boys to have lots of partners and boys started to appreciate why girls would say no."

Yet, while the sessions were clearly valuable in helping the youngsters with their social skills and sexual behaviour,

Marcus wasn't sure how many ever actually went to get HIV treatment: "For young people, there was too much stigma attached to going to a clinic."

It occurred to him that, for these young people, journeying to an unfamiliar place on the other side of town to talk to strangers about their problems would be a lot more traumatic than just being taken after a football session to a clinic a few yards away by someone they trusted. "We needed a base where the same kids could come every week, play football and see health professionals."

AND SO THE IDEA OF THE HEALTH ACADEMY—putting Whizzkids United's combination of football and HIV treatment and advice to use in the grounds of Edendale Hospital—was born.

But it would take some £60,000 to set up. Marcus went to companies, aid

organisations, governments and charities throughout South Africa, across the rest of the continent and all over the world. Even so, finding the money was often a soul-destroying process.

Some bodies would give money only when they could see a project working, not just to support a concept. Some

overseas investors simply saw Africa as a dead loss: a place where people were poor, got ill and died—and that was just the way it was. Marcus also discovered that apartheid still lived in the hearts and minds of some South Africans. "Why do you want to help those kaffirs? Let them die," one company director told him.

EVERY DAY WAS A STRUGGLE, NOT knowing whether he'd get the funds he needed. Then, in 2009, the American pharmaceuticals firm Abbott—whose UK charity fund had helped set up a Whizzkids project in the UK—donated half the money. A few months later, Brian Moshal, CEO of the Victor Daitz Foundation—a charity-funding body based in Durban—told Marcus he'd provide the rest. "It was what I'd waited so long to hear," Marcus says. "I nearly jumped out of my seat."

The Whizzkids United Health Academy opened in June 2010. It has now seen 12,000 young people, giving them access to a counsellor and HIV testing. Some 1,100 have tested positive, and around 600 are currently receiving treatment.

But, stresses Marcus, "supporting a

"There was too much stigma attached to going to a clinic"

young person with HIV isn't only about giving them the drugs. It's also about helping them with their situation."

One evening last June, Mary*, a 16-year-old girl, turned up at the academy. She was visibly shaken. A counsellor discovered that she'd been dragged into a shed and repeatedly raped.

"She escaped and came straight here," Marcus says. Tragically, Mbali tested HIV-positive as a result of the attack. But over the next few weeks she had counselling and academy staff found her a place in a foster home.

Around one in three South African women and one in ten men will be raped. "Nearly always, the victim is too scared to give evidence and the attacker gets away," Marcus says.

With the academy's support, however, Mbali did give evidence and her 35-year-old attacker was jailed for ten years. If it hadn't been for the academy, Marcus is sure she'd have had ▶

Marcus with Willi Lemke, the UN's special adviser on sport



◀ to return to the children's home and been raped again.

The academy also now runs educational and work experience programmes. One of Fifa's Football for Hope centres, which promote public health and education, opens on the site this month. In June, six youngsters are heading to Brazil at the time of the World Cup to take part in a tournament for disadvantaged people.

Meanwhile, Marcus is as busy as ever, securing funding for projects, writing reports and meeting people and organisations who need his help. These days, mind you, he makes sure he also has

some time for a private life. Last year he got engaged to Andrea, whom he met in 2012 while she was working for the United Nations in Durban.

Among his many ambitions, Marcus wants to set up similar health programmes in other parts of Africa. "There are millions of young people all over the continent who desperately need our help.

"We've achieved so much more here than I ever thought we would, but there's still so much more to do." ■

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To donate, please visit justgiving.com/MarcusWKU or whizzkidsunited.org.

"Would You Mind Moving Away, Please?"



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