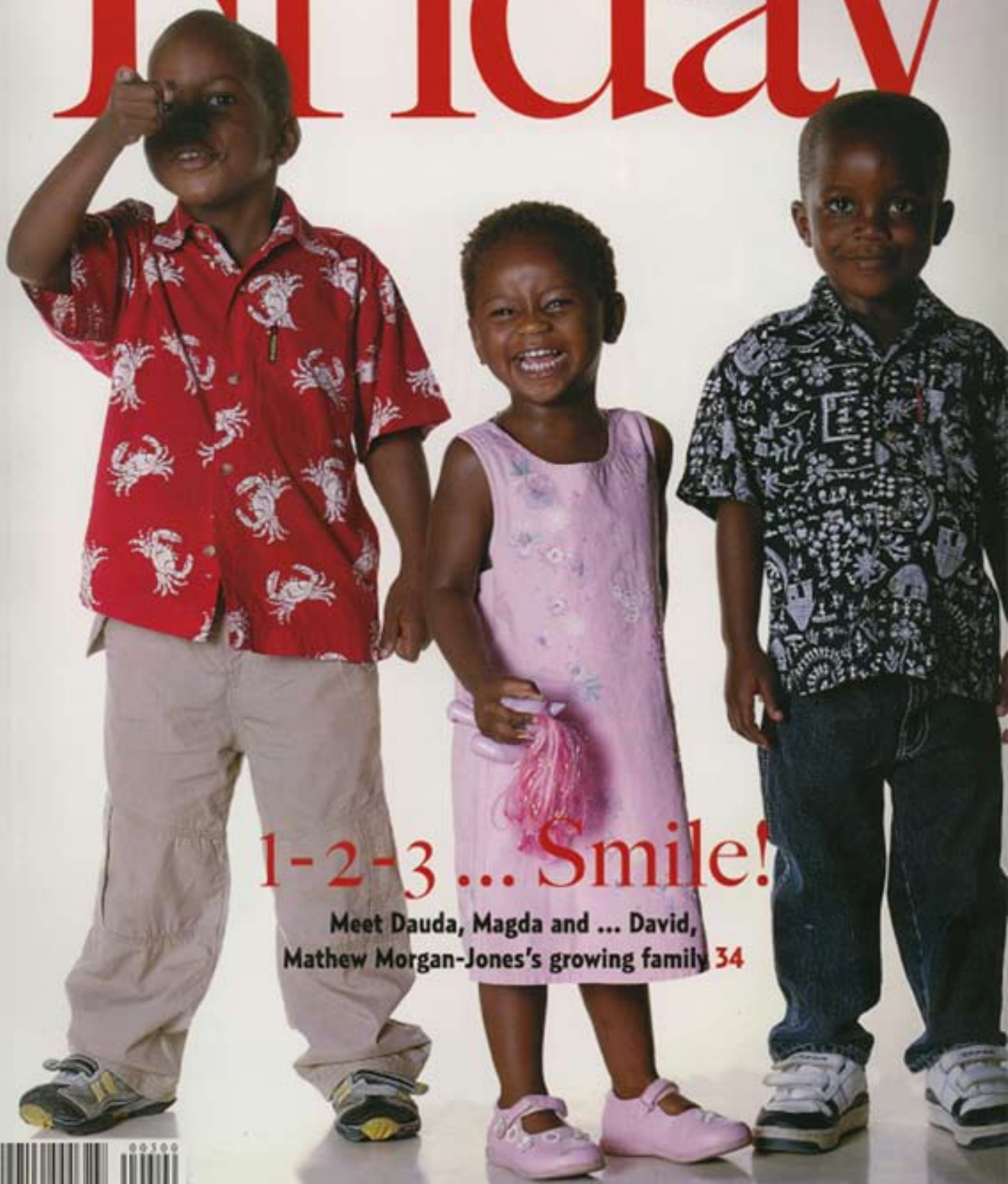


# Friday

MARCH 9-15, 2007



1-2-3 ... Smile!

Meet Dauda, Magda and ... David,  
Mathew Morgan-Jones's growing family 34





# Three ... and counting!

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HEN *FRIDAY* BROKE THE STORY ON Mathew Morgan-Jones and his two adopted children from Sierra Leone (in May 2006), it changed the lives for many other children back in Freetown. The generosity of the people and organisations in the UAE helped Morgan-Jones form the All As One charity. He also kept his word and brought home David, his son Dauda's best friend. But more milestones have to be reached, he tells [Sandhya Rajayer](#). Photos by [Asghar Khan](#)

Today Sierra Leone is slowly but surely retracing its steps to normalcy but not so long ago, it was a country in turmoil as civil war held it in a crushing vice. The consequences were beyond disastrous as the world realised. Many a child was born to a mother who did not live to hear her baby's first cry. Hundreds of children were born in neighbourhoods accustomed to waking up to the staccato sounds of gunfire first thing in the morning. The only rules of engagement at that time were: kill, dismember and destroy.

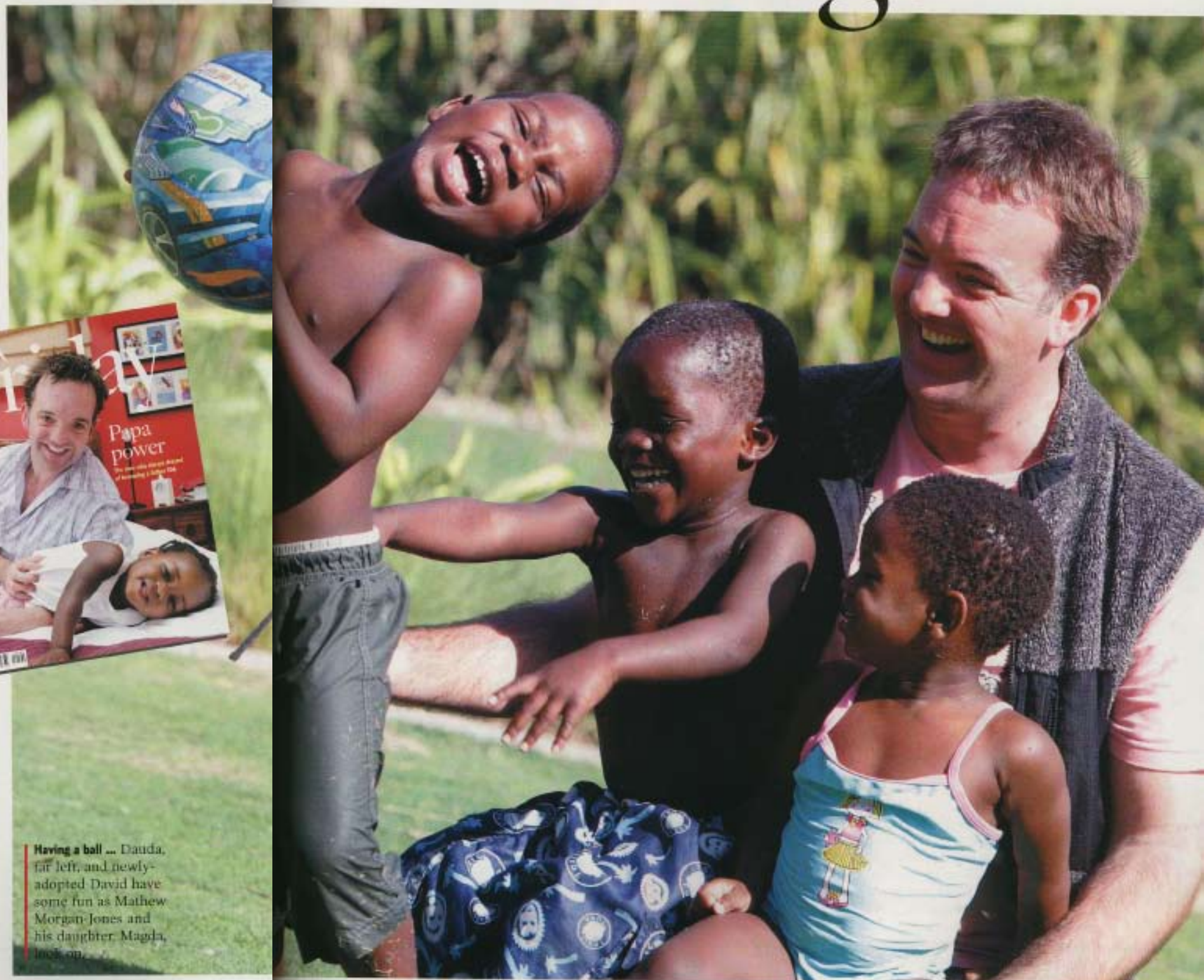
Baby boys grew into child soldiers, feeding on hatred, revenge and fear.

Girls became women at the age of 10, many of them eking a living for themselves and their siblings by resorting to prostitution. It is said that life is the best teacher but there is another kind of life, like the one these children were experiencing, that had a hard time earning the title, 'Best Teacher'.

Sierra Leone is a small West African country where more than two million of its 5.5 million citizens were displaced during a civil war that raged between 1991 and 2002. It was this dark reality that motivated Dubai resident Mathew Morgan-Jones to first adopt two and then this year, a third child, from the All



Having a ball ... Dauda, far left, and newly-adopted David have some fun as Mathew Morgan-Jones and his daughter, Magda, look on.





As One (AAO) orphanage in the nation's capital, Freetown. It also impelled him to start a fundraising drive in the UAE to help the orphanage going as it was under the constant threat of closure.

Morgan-Jones is no stranger to readers of *Friday*, having first been featured in May last year. The Englishman became a single parent at 33, to two adopted children - Dauda, now 4, and Magda, now 2 - from Sierra Leone, in July 2005. The father of three says he did not take this step to earn himself stripes from the Office of Altruism. He simply wanted to experience the joys of fatherhood. And what better way than this where love, sunshine and warm hugs are freely dispersed to three adorable toddlers who could have been completely unaware of the transforming power of love had fate decided otherwise.

Last year, Morgan-Jones brought home Dauda and Magda - but there was just one more commitment to honour. Dauda's best friend at the orphanage, David, who is a couple of months younger than Dauda, was not going to be left behind. He would join his best pal and brother - just as soon as the next set of formalities were completed.

They were and today David is where he belongs - with his family consisting of a beaming dad and a happy Dauda and Magda.

"I have always visualised having three kids but some of my friends did think I was crazy to adopt a third one so soon after bringing the first two home. But what [really made me] bring David home was that a family from the US that had applied for David's adoption withdrew their application when things turned difficult," he says. "I also had bonded, though in a small way then with David, when I had stayed at Freetown for Dauda and Magda's adoption. Mainly, though, the fact that David was Dauda's best friend made the decision imperative. It would be great to have them all in the same home."

#### And then there were three!

So, how's the family doing? Butter-soft moments and all that? Morgan-Jones cheerfully admits that things didn't go exactly to plan. "The honeymoon period for the family lasted exactly three weeks. And then began the joys of watching real life 'capture the moments': 'The nitty-gritty of sharing toys and papa's attention got to all of them.' There were days and weeks



**Taking the plunge ...** Mathew Morgan-Jones with his kids: Magda, David and Dauda. Clearly David is not as keen on swimming as are his brother and sister.



when they all wondered if it had been a good idea for David to join them. However, full marks to David, a remarkably friendly child who adjusted to his new surroundings in less than four weeks after spending four years in the orphanage.

Morgan-Jones also hints that there could be another addition to the family in the future. He has a lovely husband-and-wife team who help him care for the children, and his sister, Debbie, is here currently to help him as he has been travelling a lot for work.

David, Dauda and Magda all come from AAO, a Freetown charity organisation that operates a children's centre, medical clinic, informal school and other programmes for abandoned and orphaned children. Morgan-Jones visited the centre when he went through the various stages of the adoption process in 2004 and 2005.

After adopting his first two children, he learnt from American founder Deanna Wallace that the centre was in danger of being closed due to a lack of funds. Morgan-Jones then organised a fundraising dinner in Dubai that raised about Dh55,000. He then set up a UAE branch of AAO, which is registered as a non-profit organisation, licensed through Dubai Aid and Humanitarian City. While the initial funds helped prop up the centre, it became evident that a steady flow of aid was needed to sustain it in the long-term.

In early 2006, a total of Dh300,000 was raised. DHL offered to airfreight emergency supplies and Christmas gifts

collected by the Regents School and the people of Dubai, ensuring that the kids at AAO had their best Christmas ever. Two containers filled with clothes, toys, school supplies, beds, mattresses, water tanks and other items were shipped to the orphanage courtesy of DHL/Danzas and PWC logistics, while Crocs Shoes donated hundreds of shoes. Mercato Mall and the Town Centre organised a donation drive of Christmas presents and Regents School came up with the shoebox donation idea. Jebel Ali Hotels International donated child sponsorship as a holiday gift for their corporate partners. Horizon School organised a dinner dance fundraiser and raised more than Dh80,000.

In November 2006, when Morgan-Jones visited Freetown for David's adoption, the water tanks were installed - a necessity because the water supply tankers only come every three days and the existing water tanks were too small to store sufficient water. Yet, despite the increased capacity, two or three additional water tanks are still required.

The donation drive also helped spruce up the toddler wing, with play equipment, new beds and mattresses.



**Call for help**

Despite the generosity, the AAO kitty has again run dry. At the time of this interview, Morgan-Jones estimates that February was the last month the charity had sufficient funds.

So once again, he is faced with the task of keeping the operation going. At present, the AAO requires Dh32,000 per month to cover the basic costs of running the centre.

In order to make it simpler for people to offer support and feel good about their contribution, Morgan-Jones has devised a number of schemes.

The Child Sponsorship Programme enables individuals or companies to donate Dh1,440 per year to fund the basic upkeep of a child. This includes medical care and education as well as the salaries of teachers and carers at the centre. It enables donors to build a relationship with the child they sponsor. Donors can exchange letters and photos if they wish. Morgan-Jones says the AAO needs a total of 400 sponsors to take care of monthly expenses for a year.

Electricity, conspicuous by its absence, is also needed at the centre. "We request organisations to donate a 20 KV generator and one or two smaller 5 KV generators for the small medical clinics at the back of the orphanage. The clinic services not only the orphanage but also people from the neighbourhood," says Morgan-Jones.

"Then there's vinyl flooring that's required and Sierra Leone being very expensive for these kinds of supplies as everything is imported, it is better to source it from Dubai. We also need strong metal beds for the children, because kids often bounce on them.

"As for the AAO centre, staff would like to serve food to large batches of residents at one time, they need a really big dining table. [We're aiming to] get it made locally so this would generate work. We try and balance what we can source locally and what's more economical when taken from here [Dubai]."

**A tide of needy children**

The long-term challenge for Morgan-Jones is to keep the AAO centre running and expand it so that more children can enjoy a warm, loving home. And while the war's over, there are still children in need. One factor is that the social welfare system in Sierra Leone has become stricter on child abuse cases, says Morgan-Jones. As a result, abused children are likely to be sent to NGOs, such as AAO.

**Haven for the needy ...**

Twin boys at the All As One orphanage in Freetown, Sierra Leone.



COURTESY ALL AS ONE

One such case in point is Maury's. According to AAO, the little boy was repeatedly abused by his mother, who would pour boiling water over him after she had a second child. (Presumably, she was severely traumatised or mentally ill.) Today, after less than a year at the orphanage, Maury has his childhood back.

At present, AAO houses 65 children. While some have been adopted, more children have been taken in. When Morgan-Jones was there last, he was told that one of the local orphanages had closed down due to lack of funds. On the streets of Freetown, he says you see children younger than 12 caring for their siblings, some eking out a living by selling charcoal. Freetown has about 15,000 street children and the UN estimates that there are more than 350,000 child orphans in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone also has one of the highest maternal mortality rates: one in six or seven women die during childbirth. Sixty-four per cent of the population does not have access to medical care. Although child mortality rates are high, many of the babies that survive end up at orphanages.

**Building a Future Project**

Faced with these challenges, Morgan-Jones envisages an expanded role for the AAO - the Building a Future Project. He anticipates a large intake of children at the centre in the future. To accommodate this, he envisages three separate structures: one for babies and toddlers and one each for older boys and girls. The centre would have a school complex with 10 classrooms, a computer lab and a library. With orphans numbering 80 to 100, Morgan-Jones would like it to also serve the needs of the neighbourhood. The school would enrol about 50 children each year, including kids from the neighbourhood. In the evening, it would offer adult literacy classes.

To fund this, Morgan-

Jones has dreamt up a number of schemes. In one, schools are encouraged to sponsor a classroom. He says Dh28,000 would cover the cost of building a classroom. After this is accomplished, providing furniture and classroom supplies could be an ongoing sponsorship project for a school.

He is also reaching out to various industries for donations. "We would like to request the hotel industry to give us \$10 for every room stay. We are also looking to see if property developers could give Dh100 for every property sold."

Another reason Morgan-Jones is pressing for the Build A Future Project is the escalating rental costs in Freetown. The AAO centre is aiming to move out of its rented premises into its own (yet to be purchased) building. The other major project planned for the AAO is a medical centre dedicated to maternal, baby and child care. There is also a plan for a vocational training centre, where students would be taught trades.

"We really want the building project to take off as soon as possible," says Morgan-Jones, adding that the AAO wants to buy the land by July. The centre's expansion will happen in two phases, he says. Phase one will include land purchase, surveying and fencing, costing \$120,000. Construction costs for the school, medical centre, three children's homes, administration and support buildings will be \$285,000. Phase two will consist

**CONTACT AAO**

**AAO Dubai** is operated by a small team of dedicated volunteers. Here are the contact details for each section:

**Corporate support/sponsorship:** Contact Kelly Baker and Kyla Harrison-Gillett on corporate@aaodubai.org  
**Children Caring for Children Programme:** Nicki Morgan and her team, e-mail:

[schools@aaodubai.org](mailto:schools@aaodubai.org)  
**Child Sponsorship Programme:** Geri Mitchell, e-mail: [sponsorship@aaodubai.org](mailto:sponsorship@aaodubai.org)  
**General enquiries:** Contact Angella, Cornelia and Nicki who provide communication and administration support to the charity. Anyone interested to join the team or find out about how they can help contact them at [info@aaodubai.org](mailto:info@aaodubai.org)



of building the vocational college, dormitories and an administration building at a cost of \$260,000.

#### The response

"We've been overwhelmed by people wanting to help. We have had fantastic response from Dusit Dubai, Fairmont and the Burj Al Arab, which have donated huge cooking pans. Signature Office Support Services has generously provided a virtual office with a person to take calls. The Body Shop has promised to donate office space in late 2007 so that we can run our own operations, but that will require more volunteers."

The AAO Dubai operation is run by dedicated volunteers without whose support the charity would never be able to function.

"There is a constant need to send out press releases and we would welcome

someone from a PR background to pitch in for this. Stay-at-home ladies may have great sales skills and all they need to do is sit in the comfort of their homes and make calls on our behalf," says Morgan-Jones.

"If they have an event management background that might help even more. Or someone who works in the retail industry and can help us to make contact with potential sponsors.

"It would also be great if someone from the hotel industry could sponsor space to host our African Ball charity event that we are planning for April or May.

"I would also request people to hang on to clothes and toys until July when our next container will leave for Sierra Leone," he adds.

#### A happy family of four

So two years on, how does Morgan-Jones assess himself as a father?

"I am a little more confident in what I do as a person and a father. I am still getting comfortable with parenting, especially as my family has expanded. I still count the small victories on the road to parenting. I mean Magda was potty trained a few months ago and I was like 'Hooray! Isn't that great?'"

"I thoroughly enjoy parenting and am doing the best I can. There are moments when I do feel I haven't handled it the best way, maybe I could have done a little more preparation rather than thinking on my feet. It makes me feel a bit guilty that"

"I haven't been able to spend as much time as I should with my children because I have been travelling far too much for work. I compensate by taking a couple of days off and being there for them."

As the interview winds up, I ask him for a business card. "That's the other thing we need," he says. "Someone to take care of our printing needs and stationery. We try and cut all costs so that every dirham can then be used to support the orphanage."

The whole time he has been talking, Magda - nursing a cold and feeling unwell - has been perched on his lap. Now she has quietly nodded off to sleep. Dauda, perhaps a bit tired, has become a little cranky. Morgan-Jones picks him up, plonks him on the other knee and asks simply, "Do you want a hug? Let's go home now."

A huge carry-all bag in one hand, water bottle in the crook of his arm, Magda asleep on his shoulder, Dauda and David tagging along, Morgan-Jones and his family trail to the car park. All as one. ■



## AAO CHARITY DINNER

**In order to help orphans in Sierra Leone like this baby (left), AAO is organising a Dinner under the Stars charity function at Wafi City.**

**Date:** Thursday, March 22.  
**Time:** 7.30 pm.

**What you get:** Unlimited satisfaction for helping the children in AAO's care in Sierra Leone and a three-course dinner, welcome drink and half-bottle of beverage.

**What you give:** Dh300.  
**Bookings:** (04) 324 4100.  
**For more information:**  
**E-mail** [info@aaodubai.org](mailto:info@aaodubai.org)

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