



A Life Less Ordinary

Small Screen, Big Vision

For Lynn and Robert Nestor and their three children, charity didn't begin at home—but on a “silly” TV programme

BY CELIA DODD

THE X FACTOR, BIG BROTHER, COME DINE WITH ME...REALITY TV can be very entertaining, but it's all about shallow emotions and short-lived fame really, isn't it? Does it ever achieve anything worthwhile? In the case of one family from West Norwood, south London, the answer is a resounding yes.

In 2001, Robert and Lynn Nestor and their children Daniel, then 13, Chloe, eight, and Callum, four, agreed to take part in a new Channel 4 series, *Going Native*. The producers selected the Nestors (or the Nestor-Frushers, to give them their full name) because of their love of home comforts and typical modern liberal values. They then made them live for three months in a thatched hut in Shongwe, a Swaziland village with no electricity, no running water and a hole in the ground for a toilet. Lynn, an advocate for young offenders, had to behave like a Swazi wife, waiting on the men hand and foot. Daniel had to walk miles to school. Robert, a lorry driver, found himself herding cattle.

It was not a happy experience—Lynn still gets upset if she watches the programme. She constantly rebelled against customs such as women ▶

Now and then: The Nestors at home in south London—and (Inset) not enjoying Swaziland as part of Channel 4's *Going Native* in 2001

◀ not being able to eat eggs, and had to be persuaded not to return to London within a few days. They even absconded to a hotel for an evening.

Despite all this, the village had a profound effect on the family. They gained a rare insight into the struggle that life can be when 69 per cent of the population live below the poverty line, and 39 per cent have HIV/Aids. They realised they could never leave Shongwe behind.

"A lot of Britons might hear about somewhere like that and want to help, but not really know what to do," says Robert. "We had a big head start." The next year, he returned to Shongwe to ask the elders what the family could do. "We were very clear that we didn't just want to throw money at the community, but to make it more sustainable."

The villagers' first request was for a communal tractor that would make their farming more productive and could be rented out to other communities to give the village a new income stream.

Robert and Lynn organised a charity ball—the kids helped as waiters—and Robert ran in two marathons in order to raise the necessary £5,000. Next, they organised Christmas and summer fairs to provide the village with more chickens and pigs, and established an efficient breeding system.

Then in 2004, Robert and Lynn decided to take things up a notch. Remembering Daniel's experiences trekking for hours in the blazing sun, they decided to build Shongwe a school. They persuaded the charitable arms of big businesses—such as Swire, the major shareholder in Cathay Pacific—to provide

funds, and got the Swazi government to agree to run the school once it was finished. The local community helped to build it, and the tractor was invaluable for transporting materials.

Lynn devoted hours of her spare time to coordinating the project from London, while Robert used around three weeks of his annual leave for the next three years to oversee the work. They also appointed young villager Senzo, whom Daniel had played with during *Going Native*, as project manager to keep things ticking over in their absence.

By January 2007, the Nestors had raised around £15,000 and three classrooms had been completed. Days later, the school's first intake of 37 children arrived.

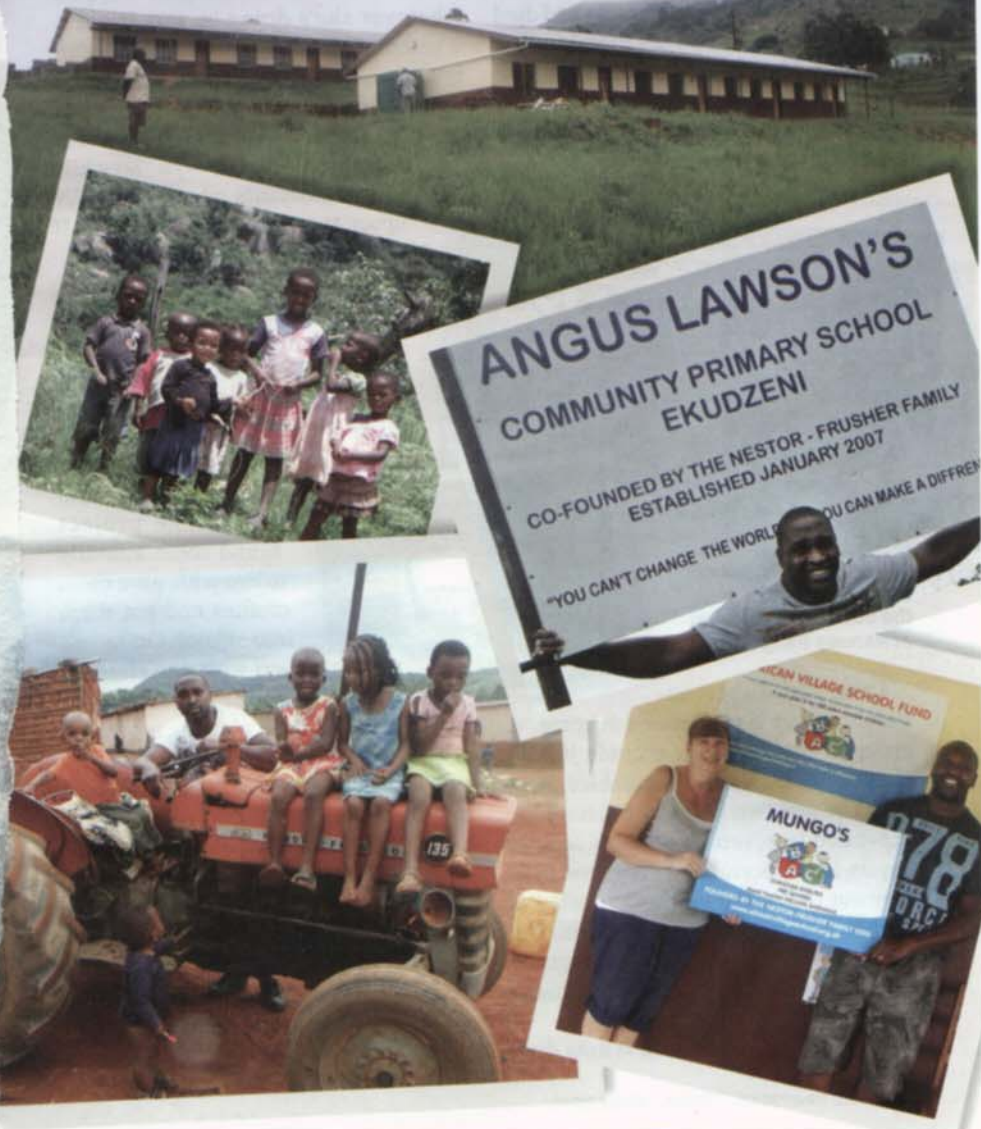
Thanks to the fund-raising by the Nestors, and considerable financial help from the British children's charity The Angus Lawson Memorial Trust, the school expanded, with new classroom equipment, textbooks and an accommodation block for staff. Many of the pupils were orphans, so the Nestors organised foster families for them. In March 2008, they introduced a daily feeding programme for the pupils, many of whom had malnutrition.

Yet the family were soon to suffer a bitter blow. In ▶

From reality TV to the reality of Africa: (clockwise from top) the school; Robert with the sign; the new pre-school; the tractor that started it all; and just some of the children who've benefited

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF LYNN AND ROB NESTOR

The Nestors had a rare insight into the struggle that life can be when 69 per cent of the population live below the poverty line



◀ January last year, Robert and Lynn had a text from Senzo saying that an 11-year-old pupil had died of starvation during the holidays. She collapsed while out playing.

"To lose a child, at that age, is just awful," says Lynn. "Her parents had died when she was five and her grandmother was bedridden. The worst thing was that I'd realised the term-time-only feeding programme was a problem, but I thought I'd deal with it later."



Come on you Rs: Robert (right, pointing to the boots) and the boys of Hamsey Rangers



Lynn and Robert instantly set up a year-round scheme. A group of mothers now provide 100 orphans with maize and vegetables daily.

In the last two years, the school has expanded to seven classrooms and 170 pupils. Last December, Robert and Lynn flew out to put the finishing touches to Mungo's, a pre-school that doubles as emergency accommodation for orphans. Robert also set up the Hamsey Rangers football team for teenagers.

A lot of the organisation is now done

by Senzo and others, but Lynn—Robert is now usually busy with work in Britain—goes out to Africa four times a year and oversees the project from London.

It's not unusual for her to be texted about some crisis, which means dropping whatever she's doing to sort it out—whether it's finding money for new textbooks or organising medical care for a sick orphan. Worrying about the project often keeps her awake at night. "But I'm very practical," she says. "So while I have moments where I'm really upset, it usually sorts itself out. If not, I'll come up with a plan B."

What keeps her going is that, despite the heartbreak, there's been so much to be happy about. Three of the smiling faces on her mousemat belong to Mkhanyiseli and his sisters Gcinile and Nelile, who were left alone when their

father went to find work. The project found them a family to live with, gave them clothes and got them into school. On Lynn's next visit, the children proudly showed her their glowing reports.

When Lynn is in Africa, she and her own children miss each other terribly. She has a recording on her mobile phone of each of them saying goodnight. "It gets lonely in my hut with just a portable radio. When I'm there, people come at me from all directions. There is so much need that it becomes overwhelming."

So far the Nestors have raised around £80,000 for the project. The three

children remain as involved in fundraising as school and work permit (Daniel's now a benefits officer). All three have been back twice, most recently to help with building work. "Going to Swaziland makes you grateful, because you see what people your age have," says Chloe. "When I was eight, I was mainly concerned that they didn't have toys. Now it's electricity, hair straighteners and TV."

Robert and Lynn happily admit they have a volatile relationship—perfect for reality TV!—but Lynn believes the project has given a focus that's brought the whole

family closer. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm eternally grateful to that TV programme. Out of something very silly, came something life-changing."

"Until Shongwe, we were just going our own sweet way," agrees Robert. "Now it is part of us. It's how we think."

And what, above all, makes it worthwhile for Lynn? "The children," she says firmly. "Actually, not *the* children—they're *our* children." ■

» For more information on the Nestors' project, go to readersdigest.co.uk/links.