

## HALF SIZE HEALTH WORKERS



*and how a young man they called 'the beard' helped some twelve year old 'freedom fighters for health' show the adults how to promote their rights*



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esterday I heard a visitor to our camp call us “*poor children*”. Six months ago my friends and I (We are eleven and twelve years old) would have just shrugged our shoulders. Now “*poor children*” makes me angry. There is no respect in the phrase “*poor children*”. “*Poor children* “don’t have rights. Let me tell you how, with the help of our friend Dino we stopped being ‘poor’ and started to gain the respect and the rights we were due.

When we came to the camp after all those days travelling from the homes we had been driven out of, we know we were safe and

that there would be enough food for us at least for the time being. But the days passed slowly. Our parents were angry and unhappy. No one seemed to think much about us children. We wandered about with little to do and some of us got into trouble for fighting and even stealing.

The Camp Leaders who lived in a big tent up the hill where the ground was nearly always dry, told us that they would start a school 'soon', but how soon was that?

Only Dino, who called himself a youth worker, seemed to have ideas which made sense to us. 'Dino the Beard' they called him, because he was trying to grow one without much success. A few hairs had sprouted but they were very straggly and there were bare patches in between. In truth the beard that Dino was growing to make him look older only made him look younger than his 20 years. Not much older than us twelve year olds.

But if all Dino's ideas had been hairs' his beard would have reached his knees. He was just full of ideas. "Pretend you are freedom fighters" he said," but freedom fighters for health. You should divide your self into brigades each with a separate task. I'll help you organise yourselves.

What are some of the things you think you can do?"

Well the place is very dirty," said someone. "I suppose we could help there."

"Yes," said Dino the Beard, "but be careful. Choose things that you can do well and which are interesting to do. Don't let older people make you do things they should be doing themselves

So the cleaner camp brigade, organised by a boy called Musa, began by making litter bins with branches and old sacks and drew

pictures of monsters on them so that people would feed them.



When Mrs. A (I won't tell you her real name) and Mr. B suggested to them that they clean out the drains, the cleaner camp brigade asked them if the adults would help. Mrs A and Mr. B. said they were too busy. (Swatting flies perhaps?) So the cleaner camp brigade said they were also too busy. But when Mr. C. and Miss D asked the brigade to *join in* to help building the fence round the well, they did agree and after they had all worked together for a whole day they all ate together with Mr. C and Miss D and sang songs to the stars.

The second brigade was the "*Help the little ones brigade*". This was the brain child of Tara, the oldest girl in a large family. Before soldiers came to her village her mother had been a teacher and her parents had always taught them how to play with the little ones. So Tara and her brigade volunteered to make play groups for the one to three-year olds who turned up first by ones and twos and then in great numbers, so great, indeed, that the brigade had to persuade more and more older children to join .

They made pictures in the sand with sticks and leaves and flowers and played counting games with stones. The Beard managed to convince families outside the camp to give boxes and bits of cloth and even some money to buy paints and make picture books and toys stuffed with cotton. One day he even persuaded a

tailor to bring his sewing machine into the camp and on another a carpenter came for an hour or two and even left a saw for the brigade to use.

The last brigade was the *old and young brigade* organised by two close friends Sarah and Anna and they were, perhaps, the most successful of all. They helped to wash the old folks and bring them food. Some wanted the newspapers read to them so the children helped with what they could find.

Old people also have trouble with their feet and The Beard found a nurse who could explain to children what they could do to cut toe nails and take out the Jigger fleas which buried beneath the skin and caused the old folks such trouble.

But most of the time what the old people wanted most was someone to visit, talk with them, and above all to listen to them. Very often the children would come back wide eyed with the stories they has been told of what happened long before they or sometimes ever their parents had been born. Many found too that they were able to share their troubles and secrets with the old people in a way that they could not do with their friends or with their parents.

So the brigades prospered and the children found that time no longer hung so heavy on their hands, but three months went by and still the promised school never came.

“I think it is time you started to throw your weight about,” said Dino the Beard.

“What weight is that,” said Karim, “we are only kids. “

“You have a lot more muscle that you think,” said The Beard. “I’ve heard people talking about you. One lady called you, the conscience of the camp, besides I’ve got some help for you.

The next day Dino came back with a lady with a big camera and a big ear for listening. When the children told her what they had been doing she never stopped them unless they all talked at once. She asked some questions which showed that she had really understood what they were trying to do and some others which helped children to think about things that they needed to do a little more clearly. After a bit she said to them:

“Take us round and show us what you are doing “, and the brigades took her round everywhere and, all excited, explained all they had done and what they planned to do. “Thank you,” said the lady and got into a jeep which rattled up towards the camp office.

Three days later The Beard called the children to his tent. He had a newspaper pinned up on the board he used for notices. The front page had four big photos on it. The first three showed photos of the brigades at work: the ***cleaner camp brigade*** standing near the latrines with the notice they had made about hand washing; the ***help the little ones brigade*** with one of the number puzzles they had made and the ***old and young brigade*** with some of the walking sticks they had cut and smoothed. Each picture had the same caption “THEY DID”.

The last picture was of the empty space before the camp headquarters where the school and its playground were supposed to have been built. The camp leaders were pointing, probably trying to show where something was going to stand when they got round to starting it. The caption here said “THEY DIDN’T”.

The next day The Beard and the brigade leaders came up to the camp office. “The children want to say they are really sorry about this article, “said The Beard.”They knew you were just about to start the school, because you had promised them.

They think the journalist was most unfair. Don't you?" He turned to the brigade leaders.

"Of course," said Musa. "We know that the school tent *with its latrines* is going to be put up next week. We'll help see they are kept clean.

"Of course," said Tara "We are really happy that you are going to provide *classes for the very young children once or twice a week*. We help you with them.

"Of course," said Jomo, "and I'm sure you had in mind that the school tent *could be used as a club by the old people during the weekends*. We'll give them help to get there if they need it."

The chairman of the camp committee had lived long. He knew when he had been defeated. "Of course" he said. "All those things were in our plans ".

And when the school opened two weeks later he told everyone that they were his ideas, and neither The Beard nor the children told anyone anything different.



## **A NOTE FOR TEACHERS**

### **About this story**

This story is based on an amalgam of true events which happened in different refugee camps in different countries. It highlights the way in which children taking responsibility can lead towards empowering them to demand their rights.

It also illustrates how adults can attempt often quite cynically to use children to do things they do not want to do or fear to do themselves.

### **Activities**

Details of how to make the toys and games which Help The Little Ones Brigades made are available through Child-to-Child and its centres. Also available through them is the booklet *Child-to-Child and Children living in camps*. Helping old people outside school is possible in every community. Often the richer the community, the lonelier it's old people.

*Source: Written specially for this website by Hugh Hawes with advice from many others.*