



BUILDING HOPE



ht back Star Sunday reporter Keith Falkiner joined

THINGS may be tight back home but the Niall Mellon Township Trust blitz to build homes for the poor of South Africa shows the generosity of the Irish spirit is still very much alive.

Nurses, teachers, IT workers and secondary school students joined hordes of skilled tradesmen as 950 volunteers marched into the sprawling shanty town of Wallacedene to spend six days building 200 new homes.

Despite heavy rain that would put soggy Irish weather to shame, nothing was going to stop this determined group from reaching their goal.

Charity leader Niall Mellon, a millionaire developer, set up the trust in 2002 after encountering the horrific poverty in the townships of Cape Town.

Rain

Niall's motto was that no child should have to live in a shack — but it's not until you see the awful reality of a shanty town with your own eyes that you really understand why he set up the trust.

Last weekend, an Irish media team was brought on a tour of the shacks of Wallacedene where we encountered the harrowing sights of mothers and young kids huddled up as the rain pelted through their cardboard walls.

In one shack we met seven-year-old Thabiso Rhithilili, a chronic asthmatic, perched up on a shabby chair away from a great puddle of water.

Above Thabiso's head were sheets of deadly lung cancer causing asbestos — but it was the only thing his mum Zoleka had to stop the rain from falling on his head.

Like all of the other 6,000 shacks

cramped on top of one another in Wallacedene, Thabiso's had no running water and electricity was supplied through bare wires that often cause deadly fires.

Thankfully, Thabiso's family was one of those on the list for a Niall Mellon home.

An old cliché that's done the

rounds for years is that children in the third world are happy despite having so little.

And yes, the children in the township were always smiling, singing, waving and dancing.

Shack

But that doesn't mean they aren't suffering through the effects of poverty and living in a shack with no running-water or sanitation.

Many of the people in Wallacedene spoke of the lack of dignity and low self esteem associated with living in a shack — not to mention all of the health problems exacerbated by the damp, windy and unsanitary conditions.

Like any such area, Wallacedene has its alcohol and drugs problems. The drug of choice for local addicts is the deadly crystal meth known as Tuk.

Yet through all of this, the Niall Mellon trust is giving hope to families all over Wallacedene.

From Sunday right through to Friday, the township was transformed into a typical Irish construction site, with roofers, painters, plasterers and brickies piling up the houses side by side.

The volunteers bundled onto buses at 7am every morning and worked right through to 5pm, without so much as a grumble.

Pints

It was charity in its purest form; a group of honest, decent, hard-working people giving something to those who have very little and wanting nothing back in return.

But like any good Irish get-together, when the hard work was done for the day, the thirsty builders enjoyed their well-earned few pints.

The manager of the hotel where we stayed in Cape Town said a record amount of booze was sank at his bar, as everyone enjoyed themselves without forgetting the seriousness of the task at hand.

The week culminated with the handing over of the completed houses to the families on Friday.

To see the look of wonder, joy and emotion on the faces of people, some of whom had lived in shacks

for 50 years, is something that will stay with me and I'm sure all of the volunteers forever.



TOUGH: Thabiso with mum in their shack

