Seeing her children take a gap year inspired Madeline Johnston to go on a trip of her own. When she retired as a school nurse at an independent school in Dulwich, she planned a break with certain conditions: she had to pay her own way and do something that would benefit society.

Volunteering at Sparrow Schools in South Africa fitted the bill perfectly. Ms Johnston raised £1,700 to cover her fares and living costs, and spent three months working at the schools, which offer an award-winning programme to help children disadvantaged by poverty and HIV/AIDS.

‘I did not know what to expect,’ she says, ‘but it was wonderful. I was encouraged to find so many excellent local teachers and children who were inspired to learn. It was a real adventure for me – a time to give something back.’

That meant doing everything from basic first aid training for teachers to taking classes. Ms Johnston cared for students who were ill and tackled HIV/AIDS education – ‘although the children there were very well informed and knew far more than we do’.

Even walking through the school gates each day was inspirational. ‘The students were so polite and the grounds are wonderful,’ Ms Johnston says.

Formidable odds
The vision of Sparrow Schools is now firing the London-based Sparrow Schools Foundation – the chosen charity of RCN president Sylvia Denton at congress this year. Ms Denton was inspired by the students’ ‘indomitable spirit, their hope and their enthusiasm for life and learning in the face of such odds’.

‘Two in ten of the children educated at Sparrow Schools have lost at least one family member to AIDS. Some children
The Sparrow Choir performed at the RCN’s London headquarters on World AIDS Day as part of its 2004 UK tour.

have lost both parents and have become carers for their siblings,’ says Ms Denton.

This inspirational project grew out of South Africa’s oppressive apartheid regime. Back in 1990, struck by the number of disadvantaged children neglected by the educational system, local teacher Jackie Gallagher opened a Saturday morning school in a church hall in Johannesburg.

Leavers’ exams
Within a year, the 27 children who studied on Saturdays had grown to 270, and parents were pleading with Ms Gallagher to open a full-time school. In 1993, with the backing of the local newspaper, she did just that. Her aim was simple: to offer affordable, quality education to children who had suffered through neglect.

Under huge pressure from disadvantaged children and their parents, the project grew fast. In 1993 the school had just eight teachers and 250 students. Children who had failed their leavers’ exams asked for help, too, and the Matric Rewrite Centre was set up to help them retake exams and pass.

In 1995 Ms Gallagher created the Sparrow Assisted Learning Centre to help children who needed a remedial school environment. And, last year, Sparrow Combined School was created from the high school and a skills centre to offer technological and vocational skills training to students aged between 14 and 19, equipping them for jobs in catering, business management, mechanics, computing, carpentry, hairdressing and clothing. The schools now educate 850 learners aged between seven and 19.

Despite these impressive achievements, demand remains unabated. Some 15 years after the end of apartheid, more than two million young people in South Africa continue to be disadvantaged, with no qualifications, and most have difficulty finding jobs. Sixteen percent of South African children remain uneducated because their parents cannot afford school fees. Moreover, HIV/AIDS is creating further problems as parents get sick and die, and children have no one to care for them.

Run by a non-profit-making educational trust, Sparrow has achieved great things on a small budget. Ms Gallagher’s energy and persuasive skills are known even in London, where the Sparrow Schools Foundation is based, and where a dynamic group of volunteers have now raised £170,000.

This unlikely liaison started back in 1997, when boys at Dulwich College Preparatory School (DCPS) planned a cricket tour in South Africa – he had never heard of her. Ms Gallagher explained that the local cricket board had used that £3,000 to educate its most promising cricketers at Sparrow. By the end of the call, Mr Marsh had agreed to fundraise for the first Sparrow cricket tour of the UK.

Some 18 months later, George Marsh, DCPS headmaster and now chair of the Sparrow Schools Foundation in the UK, took a call from Jackie Gallagher in South Africa – he had never heard of her. Ms Gallagher explained that the local cricket board had used that £3,000 to educate the most promising cricketers at Sparrow. By the end of the call, Mr Marsh had agreed to fundraise for the first Sparrow cricket tour of the UK.

That tour was followed by two further ones and three choir tours. The Sparrow Choir performed at the RCN in London on World AIDS Day in December 2004. According to Ms Denton, their singing was ‘wonderful and inspirational’. The London liaison is now a fruitful working partnership.

Zaid’s success story
When 15-year-old Zaid Bezuidenhout arrived at Sparrow Combined, his motor mechanic skills quickly impressed his teachers. His severe behavioural problems in numeracy and literacy classes impressed them less, however, and teachers soon discovered that Zaid could not read or write, and was playing up to hide his embarrassment.

Staff persuaded Zaid to join Sparrow’s accelerated Phonographixs reading programme, and within weeks the awkward, disruptive youth was a different person. He was a final-year prefect, and went on to technical college for his motor mechanic diploma. Graduating last year, Zaid took a job at Daewoo Motors.

How the UK foundation contributes to the South Africa schools
- Helps to provide education in Africa for those who need it most.
- Raised £170,000 since 2000, all of which has gone to support the children in Johannesburg.
- Funded sports facilities, art materials, a library and has helped to build permanent premises for the Sparrow Combined School.
- Organises and funds cricket and choir tours for children to broaden their horizons and those of their hosts in the UK.
- Provides teaching back-up in the form of experienced and gap-year volunteers.

Source: Sparrow Schools Foundation www.sparrowschools.org
'The cricket match on Palm Sunday 1997 was a wonderful day at the Oval in Alexandra Township,' says Maria Valentine, a friend of Madeline Johnston and former DCPS parent who is now a Foundation trustee and has visited Sparrow many times.

‘Jackie Gallagher is incredibly dynamic. She has the most wonderful vision for Sparrow and for the country, and a tremendous sense of people’s deprivation, too,’ says Ms Valentine. ‘It moves me that the children at the school are so committed. Parents want the best for their children, and so you have people pleading to get into the school.

‘Sparrow Combined School means that students can learn a skill, because it is so technically programme now means that individuals and companies can sponsor a disadvantaged child’s education for as little as £15 a month. Every penny of the £170,000 the foundation has raised since 2000 has gone to the Sparrow children, giving them arts materials, sports facilities, a library and help towards permanent premises for the combined school.

The hands-on ethos that draws in experienced and gap-year volunteers means that on a recent visit Ms Valentine found herself taking a class or two. ‘The teachers there are totally committed to education at Sparrow,’ she comments.

In 1996 Ms Gallagher was given a prestigious award for pioneering young leaders who have made a significant contribution to South African society.

Special needs
As the stigma surrounding AIDS-related illness and death continues in South Africa, Sparrow prioritises education for children with special needs, as well as taking responsibility for looking after their emotional, spiritual and social needs. Many children there have suffered from sexual and physical abuse, as well as the effects of alcohol, drug misuse, poverty and absent parents, some of whom have had AIDS-related illnesses.

‘It would be great if we could encourage more nurses to go there as volunteers,’ says Foundation trustee Sarah Capel. ‘So much support is needed to help the children who are responsible for a parent with AIDS.’

The volunteering ethos at Sparrow means that supporters are likely to end up being far more involved than they ever intended. Such is the dynamism of Ms Gallagher in creating award-winning schools from nothing, and drawing support from halfway across the globe that – like Ms Denton when the choir sang at the RCN, or Ms Johnston when she volunteered – a little time spent with Sparrow Schools and its vision tends to draw you in much deeper.'