



Ananda Foundation

Field Notes: Malawi

*The Compassionate Hand**

Sheree:

Situated in southern Africa, Malawi is a small country, landlocked between Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania. The population of 12 million is seriously affected by AIDS, accounting for the deaths of an estimated 86,000 a year. The need for medication and medical treatment is grave, as is the care of children orphaned by AIDS.

Our heartening adventure in Malawi actually began in Philadelphia. My flight to Frankfurt had been delayed for three days and all the passengers were tired, impatient and anxious. Finally, on the fourth day the Lufthansa plane took off. My agitated brain was distracted by a conversation with a pretty flight attendant named Helen Van der Linden, who told me she was born in Malawi and volunteered in her free time at an orphanage named Dzanja La Chifundo. I shared the mission of our Ananda Foundation, and suggested that the organization contact us for a possible grant.

Sure enough, six months later, we received a letter from a young English volunteer in Malawi named Lucy Coles. She wrote that that a flight attendant, home visiting her parents in Malawi, told her of a small foundation that might be interested in helping the shelter for children affected by HIV. This small but wonderful link proved to us that in many capacities, shapes, and forms—we have ambassadors of *Ananda* [1] working to help us.

Lucy reiterated in her letter to us that the goal of the shelter was: “to help as many AIDS orphans as we are able, have a future with their ideals and outlooks combined with knowledge taken from both cultures, and that hopefully this will instill future generations to care for each other.” We did not have to be persuaded to visit the orphanage.

Levani:

Little did we know that we would soon be meeting the youngest souls to be affected by this relentless and unforgiving disease. I was volunteering in Kenya in February 2005; it made sense to include Malawi on our trip. I met up with my mom in Nairobi and we flew aboard Kenya Airways –*The Pride of Africa*-- to Lilongwe, the capital city. It was a beautiful bright day. As soon as we landed there was a friendliness and warmth emanating from the people.

After spending the night in Lilongwe, we headed to town of Blantyre on a bus whose silent driver drove for four hours at the highest speed possible, according to the odometer, past a landscape of lush short green shrubbery and vast open space---dotted by round brown village huts made of straw. In the distance was Mount Mulange; a massive mountain boundary that separates Malawi from Mozambique. One turn off the main road at the small village of Bvumbe, and a half a mile bumping along a dirt road and we arrived at Dzanja La Chifundo, which translates as “The Compassionate Hand.” There was a large, faded but welcoming, concrete house, surrounded by flowering bushes and palm trees. Thirty-seven orphaned children and seven housemothers, made their home

here. They were a family, one bound by a laughter, singing and a stinging past. The children began to emerge slowly from the house to greet us. They formed a orderly line and one by one, kissed our hands.

It was one of those poignant moments, my mother said, she “imagined a global humanity bound only by absolute love.”

I wondered what they thought of us - - who we were, why we came to visit them. Then I realized that it was just as important to be live in this moment and give back the love that was coming at us. Who we were didn't matter. Where we came from didn't matter. What mattered was right here. Right now.

While my mom sat and talked with Ann on the steps of the front yard. Lucy showed me around. Originally from the UK, with curly red tresses, she was in her twenties, and originally came for a few months to help her church mission. After volunteering as a kindergarten teacher and loving her job with Dzanja La Chifundo, she decided to stay on another few years. Now she divides her time volunteering with the children in the mornings, hosting volunteer interns, and working for her church out in villages in the afternoons.

Sheree:

D'janza La Chifundo, *The Compassionate Hand* consists of thirty-seven children from three to fourteen, seven housemothers, two administrators helping Ann Davidson, a lively blonde woman who lives nearby. Born in Zimbabwe, Ann and her husband have made their home in Malawi for the last thirty years. She took the reins from its Greek founder, several years ago. With copious humor and common sense, Ann is assisted by seven housemothers who live on the site, with administration and medical care given by two strong and loving Malawian women. Ever-laughing ample Rose, is an Registered nurse. She worked for twelve years on a tea plantation estate. In the end, she was not treated with the affection she gave, and she decided it was time for her to leave and find a job in which she felt valued. Elizabeth, a tall, thin young lady with long black braids and a broad radiating smile, had three children, two of whom are twins. Her husband left her. As housemother coordinator, she oversees and facilitates the other housemothers. She managed to learn the hula very quickly from Levani's delightful hula lesson.

The children, oh, the children! They are little angels with ebony skin and faded t-shirts. Most of them have been gathered by Ann, Rose and Elizabeth, from dysfunctional street lives, or given by ill parents to weak to care for them. There is Ruth Victor, who joined the orphanage in 2004. She likes music and acting and can dance very well. Daniel James is fifteen, a quiet boy who does well at school and at home. He is the leader of the Wildlife Club,(Dzanja la Chifuyndo is a registered member within the bird-watching community). Siblings Manesi, age seven and and Memory Kasimu, age five, were found huddled in a corner of a shack, with a 14 year old cousin. They had no food. Manesi rarely smiles, but now both attend nursery school classes led by Lucy Coles in a narrow hot hallway of the house. Ananda Foundation plans to have the kids help to build their

own airy little open-air building on the property, where the children can study their ABC's with a nice breeze at their backs.

The boys and girls sing Christian hymns with an African flavor - - for visitors and for their own pleasure, complex rhythmic patterns and harmony. They are accompanied by orphanage boys who play on bottle caps, home made guitars and drums made from recycled aluminum and wood. Some of the children at this shelter have HIV. Most are orphans and are left to elderly grandparents who cannot care for them. Each of the housemothers who lived with the children had come from difficult family backgrounds or had been abandoned by their husbands. Here, they found a new sense of freedom for themselves and a new purpose—raising young children in their own culture and giving them a chance at life.

Levani:

The big sprawling house has cracks in the walls and peeling paint. After forty years---it is in need of a facelift. The exterior may be dilapidated, but there was a love that bubbled from the interior. We walked around the four bedrooms. The rooms were simple; mattresses lined the floor and blue mosquito nets hung from the ceiling up above. On the walls were handprints of the children. Little wooden chairs were painted lemon yellow for the small children. A retired elderly lady in the community had offered to sell the ten acres of land and the old home for the children and gave an unlimited time period by which the trust could pay for it. Ann revealed proudly: “We have just finished paying off the last payment. It took us two years and now we can finally call it our home.”

We came outside to an open yard. The teenage boys had set up their band complete with a homemade guitar with a handle made from a soda can, a drum made from a trash bin and an interesting percussion instrument made of bottle caps on an aluminum wire.

The children began to sing songs in the local language of *Chichewa* influenced by island beats of reggae. They rocked back and forth on their feet, clapping their hands, shuffling from side to side. Ann pointed out that one of the young children had created a frog dance. He took pride being the *Usher* of Malawi, hopping and jumping from one side to the other like a frog in sync with each beat. While we sat on the concrete steps, under an ivory moon, the children sang to the warm air and mosquitoes and us. I couldn't contain my happiness and got up and danced. At one point, one of the girls began to sing a song titled “*With His Grace*,” a capella. Her voice was heavenly and with each note she stirred our hearts. Faith and Love permeate this wonderful children's home run every day with faith and joy.

Sheree:

The next morning we visited a nearby village where Dzanja La Chifundo has an elder outreach program to provide food to some of grannies who cannot take care of themselves. There were people gathered at an old fashioned handle pump, drawing water from a government well. Small children were nursing, or bright-eyed, bound in a raggedy carrier slung around their bony shoulders. Everyone smiled at us and greeted our odd

assemblage with warmth and love. Jovial Rose, now wearing a sticker I had laughingly pasted on her forehead, did the introductions -- - and scolding.

"Where is Granny?" she demanded, "and have you fed her lately?" Five minutes later, a middle-aged woman shyly walked over with Granny. The daughter was actually the granddaughter, and the grains Ann had provided a week ago, were painfully shared and divided by a hungry population of children.

Granny was a tiny slip of a woman with white cropped hair, broad nose and eyes clouded by cataracts. Ann thought she was looking somewhat weak, and we both sat down beside her under the woven shade of a roofed hut. Ann handed her two bottles of a fruit drink and some baked buns. Slowly, and with great dignity, the old woman sipped the juice and chewed the bread. The women and children nodded approvingly and gathered around, but you could see the hunger in their own eyes.

Ann told us that this woman had fifteen grandchildren. She was at least ninety years old and could not work. She didn't have any source of income and was only able to eat if people gave her the food. After Ann spoke to her daughter in law, we came to know that this woman had not eaten in nearly two weeks. There was simply not enough food to stretch among the fifteen grandchildren. Levani stood there dumbfounded. In this tiny village ---there were many cases just the same.

Levani:

When we returned to the children's home that afternoon---I brought my Hawaiian music, danced a small hula and taught the children some dance moves. They thought moving your hips was pretty funny. Of course, I exaggerated it---to make it all the more enjoyable. After the hula dance, we sat on the steps and watched as Rose held up each piece of donated clothes, deciding what would fit each child. The donations had come from church groups and our local YMCA - - carried in two suitcases that my mother hauled across two oceans all the way from Hawaii. There was something for everyone and the children were happy to receive a new item of clothing. They pranced and admired one another. It was a quiet and lovely moment.

There are a few active volunteers who contribute from a small pool in Malawi and abroad. However, the needs of Dzanja La Chifundo are many. As a small organization without a constant stream of donations---they manage day to day. They grow their own food and create their own recreational activities like soccer and their own music band.

The children are not indulged with a TV or lots of toys. Ann and her volunteers want the children to learn and discover on their own, to amuse themselves and be creative. "I know some of them will go on and pursue their academic studies, but many will return to where they come from, Ann said with a sober note. "It is important that they have the skills and know how for how to survive and create a livelihood for themselves and their families. So their life here is simple---like it will be in the village."

The staff realizes that if the students don't have an opportunity academically, then at least they will be taught skills that they can market as they become adults—to generate their own source of income. Hence they need volunteers to teach and equip the children with skills in animal rearing, carpentry, home economics, and computers; relevant skills to live in today's world as they see it.

School books, uniforms, food, medical care, and shelter are provided. Dzanja La Chifundo would like to establish a medical clinic for outreach to children who don't live at the shelter and build a soup kitchen, to help feed more of the elderly in outlying villages.

After talking with Ann and the staff we came to know what the current pressing needs are for this children's shelter:

The current water pump is electric and frequently breaks down when electricity is not available. When this occurs, Ann must travel to her house fifteen minutes away to bring great quantities of water for the children. The current water tank is in need of an upgrade.

Additionally, in one of the rooms known as the counseling room which is not equipped with fans and is situated towards the back of the house, it gets very hot during the day and the children sometimes struggle to concentrate because they are uncomfortable. Mom suggested building an unpretentious open-aired hut outside which would serve to have multiple functions in which the children will have better air flow and be able concentrate.

Lastly, though the children have mosquito nets, every year a few still get malaria. This could be limited if the dormitory windows and doors had screens. Therefore the priority needs for this home is 1) A water tank 2) An outside shelter and 3) screening in the all rooms of the home.

The estimated cost for these projects are \$6,000. If you would like to sponsor a food, education, or medical care for a child—please let us know.

**Notes by Mother & Daughter: Sheree and Levani March 2005*

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[1] Sanskrit for happiness or bliss

[2] World Bank 2003

[3] United Nations