

Malawi 2014

Let me begin by thanking each of you for your love and support of me, my team and the people of Malawi. This trip simply would not have been possible without you and I thank you with all my heart. Thank you for all your encouraging words, notes, prayers and financial support. It really gave me a lot of joy and peace to know that we were in your thoughts and prayers and to be able to open a note from many of you each night.



Trip Overview

For the month of September I and three others were working in a community called Luhomero outside of Mzuzu in the North of Malawi. Our primary purpose of this trip was to bring 30 water filters to the most vulnerable members of the community. Water is one of the most pressing issues in Luhomero. The community is very large and has an extremely limited supply of clean water. Within the community there are only about twelve working bore-holes. This means the majority of the families are drinking from streams, puddles and other contaminated sources. We met with the chiefs and village headmen to identify the most vulnerable members of the community that could benefit from receiving a filtration system. The filters we brought took contaminated water and removed all the dirt, bacterial and algae, leaving it safe to drink. It was both amazing and heartbreaking to see this issue firsthand and get to help in a small way.

When people ask me about my time in Malawi I often respond with “It was wonderful, it’s a beautiful place with even more beautiful people!” And it is, but it is so much more. Malawi is often referred to as the “Warm Heart of Africa” and it definitely lives up to its name. Amidst the pain and poverty the people of Malawi have such an incredible happiness that is so contagious. I quickly fell in love with these people, that joy and their culture. There is such a warmth in how people greet and interact with each other. I felt instantly welcomed and included. The time we spent with our friends and in the villages were always so lovely, fun and always full of laughter. I cherish each moment and experience; from the time I held little Jousa as she cried in my arms and walked with a young girl to collect water from an algae covered puddle to the times we danced and laughed with the women and swung the little ones in our arms until we all fell to the ground laughing. The moments that made my heart feel like it was going to burst from so much joy, to the times my heart was broken again and again. I was beyond blessed to have this experience and to get to share it, not only with the wonderful ladies I went with, but also with our family in Malawi.



Luhomero

- 30 sq Km area
- 4000 people
- 875 Households
- 42 smaller villages
- 1 Health Centre (only for ages 0-5)
- 1 School - Primary
- 12 Working Bore – holes (wells)





A Typical Day

It is hard to outline a 'typical' day in Malawi as things are constantly changing and new plans need to be made. For the most part our days would start relatively early with a breakfast of hardboiled eggs, white toast and french fries. After a quick stop to buy pop at the small store we drove the 20 minutes on the tarmac and 45 minutes on the dirt 'roads' into the village. Along the way we would hand out stickers to the groups of children waiting, sometimes singing along the road.

Training

Each day we would drive into Lohomero to meet the families receiving filters. We would spend time with them, hear their stories and train them on how to use and care for their filters. We would spend time one on one with each beneficiary helping them practice 'making water' with their filters and cleaning them. Along with the training we would spend time with the people, laugh, dance, and play with the children. The people were always so grateful, breaking out into song and thanking us profusely, but we were always quick to remind them that this is not us, this is a gift that God has given them.



Agnes and Mpaso

Another large part of our days in the village was spending time with a wonderful family; sisters Agnes and Mpaso and their ten kids. Time spent with them was always wonderful and we were lucky to get to visit almost every day during our time in Malawi. We would play with the kids, help break apart the maize and just spend time laughing together. They were always excited to see us come and the children always chased our car out as we left. I absolutely love that family.



On one of our first days we discovered that the oldest child, Rose (16) had a large wound on her foot. She had had it for a month and was unable to walk on it or attend school. We told Rose she needed to visit the hospital, but her family could not afford the fees. We told that the next day she needed to make it to the hospital and we would meet her there. Early the next morning Rose came the 3 hours into Ekwendeni on the back of her father's bike. We met her at the hospital, paid her fees (about \$3) and stayed with her and they treated her wound. We then took her to another clinic, got supplies and drove her back to Lhomero. Every day we went to change Rose's bandages and by the time we left her foot was completely healed. She is now walking again and attending school.



Collecting Water

On our first day in the village I had the privilege to walk with a young girl to get water. As we followed a dry river bed, she led me to a large tree. At the base was a small puddle, probably about 5 feet across. The water was foggy and grey and a thick layer of algae covered the surface. My heart sank in a way it never had before. The girl bent down and used a small bowl to skim the surface of the water, clearing away the algae and swarm of bugs. When the buckets were full the girl's eyes met mine and she motioned for me to help her lift the larger of the two onto her head. I could not believe she could carry it so easily. My friend helped me hoist mine onto my head and we awkwardly walked back to the village.



This was a pivotal moment for me. I had researched the issue, I knew the statistics, I have read stories and seen pictures, but nothing can really prepare you for seeing it first-hand. It made me think, take a step back, and made my heart ache in a way I cannot really explain. But beyond everything else, I felt extremely blessed. Blessed to have this experience, an experience that gave me the passion and drive to make things better and serve the people of Luhomero and other developing areas to my best ability.





Another wonderful moment came on one of our last days of training. We drove way out to the farthest reaches of Luhomero. The middle of no-where...literally. We were training two beneficiaries on the care and use of their bucket. I quickly noticed a little girl standing at the end of the path watching us. I walked slowly over smiling and greeting her with the little bits of Tumbuka I know. She was extremely shy, covering her face, and trying to hide her smiles and giggles. After a minute I asked her if she wanted some water, I walked back and got a cup of clean filtered water and brought it back to her. She was hesitant, but excited to try it. She smiled. As I walked to take the cup back she ran away, back down the path. I thought that was that.

We continued our training and after some time I noticed a group of girls at the end of the path. Taylor-Ann and I started to walk over, the girls squealed and ran back down the path and into the fields giggling. This happened several times. They would sneak up, we would walk over and they would run. So Tay and I decided to hide in the bushes. They knew we were there, but still they snuck up on us. We jumped out and the kids laughed and laughed. The girls has all brought their little siblings, some tied on their backs, some running behind them to catch up. We handed out stickers and played with the children swinging them in our arms and laughing together. After a while we were all quite tired. We stopped and all the children were standing there, just watching me. I wasn't sure what to do. So I did what I always do in those type of circumstances...I did the Macarena. The kids laughed and laughed. Then they started copying me. I would do a dance move and sing, "Aye, Macarena!" And they would respond "Aye, Macarena!" while copying my dance moves. It was hilarious! It went on for about half an hour before it was time to leave. We all laughed so hard. As we pulled out, crammed in the truck I stood out the window waving at the kids and yelled, "Aye, Macarena!" and one last beautiful "Aye, Macarena!" came from the choir of children. It really was beautiful.



We were not doing big things in Malawi. We took in 30 filters, helped 30 families, if each filter helps 10 people, there are still 3700 people who still do not have access to clean water, just in Luhomero. That doesn't include the rest of the country, and world. I often look at the statistics and feel at a complete loss, hopeless that the world will ever get better But then I remember that those 30 families are drinking clean water. That they aren't going to bed thirsty or getting sick. I remember that Rose's foot is completely healed and she now can walk on it and make it to school. I remember that those beautiful little children still have each sticker we gave them stuck on the mud walls of their home and that they have a month full of memories of crazy mzungus driving through the community and handing out filters. And that is what counts.



Thank you all again so, so much for your support of me, our team and our work. I have had some incredible experiences, met some wonderful people and have learned so much about myself and the world.

If you have any questions, would like to hear more about my trip or are interested in supporting these projects in Malawi please feel free to contact me or check out Julie's blog, <http://www.theseathbunch6.blogspot.ca/>

