

A Good Day in Malawi

Posted by: annroberts on: June 30, 2009

A Visit to Mwanje School

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Monday June 29, 2009 The sun was just beginning to show itself on this cold morning as I was catching up on emails and posting my blog. I was outside in the cabana down by the restaurant which is the only place for me to get wireless internet. For every day I experience I wish I had a day to write because so much has happened and I don't have enough time in the day to get it all down.

Before going to Malemia Primary we first took a detour to **Mwanje Primary School**, where Pat Kelly was to give the standard 7 students backpacks. **The National Council of Social Studies** adopted this rural school and has been providing them with resources over the years. As we drove up to the school children chased after the bus chanting "Musungu" which is white people in Chichewa. Like all the other schools children flocked around us as we disembarked and many hands shot out hoping for contact. A tried and true crowd pleaser, our students began taking pictures on their digital cameras and then showing the children the results. **Memory Makiyi the head teacher** welcomed us with big both cheek hugs laughing and talking the whole time.

We were ushered to the standard 7 class which is housed in a new building built by the Germans. As we approached singing broke out and we were led into a crowded room filled with dancing singing 12 year olds. This classroom is better equipped than some I have seen. There were desks and chairs and many teaching tools hanging on the walls which told me there wasn't theft like there was in Malemia. There was evidence of teachers using groups as a way to teach which I hear from Pat is a relatively new concept for teachers here. After a small speech our students passed out the backpacks in red and blue colors.... We then passed out sharpies so they could put their names on their bags... As I walked around the room I saw neat to messy printing of traditional names like Ioo and Ndipo and familiar ones such as Sidney and Jackson... but my favorite name was Well-born.

After the backpacks were labeled children poured out of the building, a drum appeared and the children began to dance counter clockwise in a circle and sing as their backpacks flapped with their movement. James entered the circle and was quite impressive in keeping up with these enthusiastic middle schoolers. More snap shots were taken and we reluctantly headed out leaving the party as the students continued their dance.

Malemia Primary School

As always we are dropped off first and this time the school grounds were empty of children and we were able to arrive fairly undetected. We went to the office and there was Mr. Chimkango and my students quickly headed to their classrooms. Mr. Chimkango is a drummer and brought two Djembes to school after hearing about my interest in drumming. He explained to me the difference in the ways to hit the drum and I mentioned I was familiar with the types of sounds. He commenced to teach me a simple drum song. Dum dum ki ki . Mrs. Majawa came in and raised her eyebrows in interest noting I seemed to know how to drum. Soon Mr. Chikango and I were drumming melodies and counter points... I was so into the experience I didn't realize the collection of students who gathered outside the door listening intently to the drumming.

I realized the feeding program had started and I wanted to see how it operated. The Chibali feeding project began when former study abroad students heard how little it cost to feed the students one complete meal a day. These children are poorly nourished and by feeding them a protein based meal it will give them a better chance to have a fully developed brain and body. Also by feeding them at school it will give them incentive to attend. In a newly built grass hut women from the village have been spending the morning preparing a vat of maize porridge with sugar and milk added to it. Starting with the youngest grade, each child with cup in hand dashed to the shed for their meal.

There is a very different focused energy in the compound than when the children are playing. As children finished their meal and headed back to their classrooms I wanted to meet the teacher of the class I taught last Friday. When it was apparent I was heading to the classroom a herd of children ran ahead of me shouting something and they all piled into the class before me. The Standard 3 room filled with students and all I saw was a room full of sparkling eyes and huge smiles as clearly they were hoping we would sing. So once again we sang Yafa Nkhumba with a deafening "VERY GOOD VERY GOOD YEA!!!!!!!" at the end. All I kept thinking was that poor teacher will get nothing done because the children will want to do the "very good" chant after everthing.

Tony, a student in a red jacket, from standard 4 ushered me away from the class and into his. When the other children saw his success again a massive group of children all tried to get through the door at the same time. It reminded me of a Three Stooges routine. By the time I reached the classroom about 50 students were there and immediately dropped to the floor when I entered. I ended up singing "Every night I go to town the boys keep kicking my dog around." They clapped to the beat. Then I showed them the steps to clogging and that really had them mesmerized... I kept chanting "heel toe step back step heel toe step back step." Again I sang as I clogged and we all laughed and sang Yafa Nkhumba with what is now my signature "VERY GOOD VERY GOOD YEA!!!!!"

Our time went quickly at Malemia primary school and we were in a dilemma. The children will be practicing their traditional dance for the competition yet Mr. Laibu the standard 7 teacher asked if we could come to his tailor shop so he can take measurements of our students who wanted clothes made from the traditional fabric we bought. We chose to head to the village with Mr. Laibu again followed by many children. The young girl who walked with me on Friday, Chamem, felt bold enough to take my hand and that is how we walked as we resumed singing as we headed to the tailors shop in town.

We sat down on the stoop and waited while Carolyn and Jeff got measured for their clothes. The ritual began... "My name is George what is your name? My name is Ahn." My Name is Salama what is your name? My name is Ahn. As I sat there for some reason I thought of my sister Nancy and how she used to do this hand slapping routine "I am a pretty little dutch girl" and so I showed a simple routine to the children. We would start out slow and then pick up speed. I have no idea how many children I played with while sitting on that stoop but it always ended when a child made a mistake we would both throw our heads back and laugh and laugh.

Our attention was interrupted by music and drumming. Dancing and singing on their way down the road were a colorfully dressed group of women who were carrying produce on their heads. I thought, "Oh no I

hope they are not coming to us hoping to sell their wares.” The group of 30 women of different ages, accompanied by two male drummers, stopped in front of the tailor shop and sang to us... I jumped up and moved into the group and started beating on one of the mens drums.... All stopped singing as I drummed my favorite beat.... When I stopped the whole group roared in laughter and what I hoped was appreciation for my efforts... Rather than laughing at my primitive attempts. The men blew on their whistles and the group proceeded to dance, sing, and head up the hill on their way to who knows where.

We headed back to Annies Lodge at about 3pm, stopping in Zomba where we replenished our water supply, exchanged money, and bartered with the vendors. Some stayed in town to eat at Tasty bites. Dinner was by candle light for the electricity was out but at this point it is routine for us. All bring flashlights to dinner with them. On the way back to our rooms Pat and I noticed the monkey lure was gone. This is a long missive but still does not represent all that I experienced today.

Are these blogs too long? I am curious as to who is reading them? I would love to hear from some of you and any feedback you can give me would be appreciative. Peace, cheers, and love, annie (Pat said that it is difficult for people here to pronounce one syllable names so I have decided I will refer to myself as Annie for the rest of the adventure)