

Dear everyone

Saturday, 3 March 2007

Hello again from Lusaka where the rains are tailing off and bringing in some welcome cooler weather– although today has been very hot and thundery, ending in a fine storm. We are already at the beginning of March and settled in well at OMF. Such a lot keeps happening on a daily basis and I have had the chance to see more of this close up as I have been on annual leave for the past 3 weeks. I have spent most of the time at home just catching up on being a family man and Dad for 40 children. I must say I have enjoyed it immensely, and Christine and I even managed a break away in Dar es Salaam for 3 days on our own. It was very hot and humid while we were there, but the beaches and hotels were beautiful, and the novelty of being on our own really made the time special. As Christine said “What more could you want but to sleep till you are ready to waken, and to eat 3 meals a day without cooking any of them.”

This indulgent little break was made possible by the arrival of 2 very special folk from Scotland at the beginning of February. Trich and Martin Sinclair are a retired couple from Edinburgh, and they had asked if they could come over to help out for 3 weeks. They are both members in the Church of Scotland and Trich was a teacher and has been part of Amica – the Pregnancy Crisis Counselling service Christine helped set up in Edinburgh, while Martin was an accountant. They fitted in well immediately, and were a great hit with the boys. They spent hours each day with the lads who are not yet ready for school, patiently listening to reading, helping with maths and generally promoting an atmosphere of care and concern by taking an interest in each boy. They mucked in every evening when the hoards returned from school, hungry, tired and grumpy, and made sure 27 pairs of shoes were cleaned, 27 uniforms shaken out and prepared for the next day, 27 lunch boxes packed etc. In fact they did so well in the first two weeks that we decided to abandon them in their last week and head for the seaside. This was all the more remarkable as this was their first time in the “real” Africa – South Africa does not count. Martin and Trich – God Bless you. You were a support, an encouragement and dose of good, practical common sense. You were also great fun.

(Please book your tickets for your next trip now – we were thinking of trying Cape Town for 2 weeks for our next break!)

While Martin and Trich were here, things continued to run on as before, with innumerable daily pressures and pleasures, and more of these extraordinary “co-incidences”. For example, we realised that our two rather battered saloon cars are not really suitable for managing the rough country roads in the rural area where the farm is located, especially when there are up to 40 people to be transported. But buying a new vehicle was out of the question. We managed through December and January as Phil was home on leave and kindly allowed us to use his 4x4. Then in February he was with us part of the month and did most of the heavy duty running around. However, the time came for him to leave and go back to his work in Eastern Zambia, and we were faced with what looked like a very difficult problem transport-wise. One morning on the way to work, I was thinking over it and simply said “God you will have to deal with this because we cannot”, and before supper that evening we were told that an anonymous donor intended to buy us a 4x4 for use given our “transport needs”. It arrived 2 weeks later and has literally been a God-send. Before that, earlier on in the month, we had taken the 7 most recent additions to our family to be assessed for attending school. They were all accepted and given places the same day, but each boy needed 1 million Kwacha (about £125) for the first terms’ school fees. We simply didn’t have the K7 million, and didn’t know what to do about it. That afternoon one of the RC priests from whom we bought the house phoned Christine and asked if he could bring some Irish visitors over as they wanted to see the set up we were running. They were a very pleasant group, and we showed them around. We did not discuss the issue of school fees, or any other expenses. However as they were leaving, one of them handed Christine an envelope. Inside was a cheque for use for the boys as we saw fit. The interesting thing was that the cheque was for – you’ve guessed it – 7 million Kwacha. We all hear so much nowadays about the reasons for believing there is no God, but what about all the reasons which show there is someone in control, and that this someone cares?

We also had the opportunity to see 4 of our big lads “graduate” from OMF and move out to live their lives on their own. Charles, David, Iwell and Martin had all been showing signs of restlessness and we could see that they needed to have a bit of independence and responsibility. So we gathered everyone together and gave them a great send off, with a

barbeque, singing and the mandatory speeches. The guys leaving were very moved (as we all were) when we listened to the other lads, old and young, telling them how much they would miss them, how they loved them, and wished them well. Sarah also spoke to them and said in her little speech that they had been great big brothers and that she would always remember them. It is always hard to see our boys go, but we have assured them we will be here for them if they need us, and thankfully so far most of them seem to have taken to their new set of circumstances very well, working hard to establish little business in the skills in which they trained. Remember these are young men who just 3 years ago were drugged and sleeping rough on the streets with no way of making money but through begging, prostitution or crime. Two of them had done jail time, one for serious assault, but today they are making a good start in trying to go straight. The other boys continue to do well facing the ups and downs of daily life with more or less good humour and courage. I attach a photo of those who go to school all decked out in school uniforms – note Memory sitting as queen bee amongst all the boys in the middle of the front row. Their names, from left to right, are:

Back row: Cleopas, Romeo, Nicholas, Mulenga, Samson, Danny
Second row: Mabvuto, Rabson, Timothy, Ackim, Lucky, Owen
Third row: Isaac, Sammy, Mathias, Lingson, David
Front row: Simba, Emanuel, Memory, Wisdom, Jeremiah

One boy, Sam, is missing because he did not wash his uniform, and 2 young boys, Steve and Thoko, who have not started school yet are also absent, as are all the older lads. The school pupils refused to let them in because they don't go to school. If you look closely you will see some of the children are wearing blue St Andrews Cross Scotland badges on their uniforms – courtesy of the Scottish Parliament via Martin and Trich.

On a much less positive note, just 2 days ago Jonathan took off again. He had spent a lot of time with Martin and Trich, whom he seemed to form a real attachment to. He and Martin in particular worked hard together for many hours, but when Martin went home, poor Johnny seemed to lose heart, and became increasingly restless. One evening when we were returning from a trip into town, we met him on the road, walking away from the house. He did not expect to see us, but agreed to come home after much persuasion, and my assurance that if he still wanted to go the following morning after discussing the matter, then we would not stand in

his way. That evening I chatted with him, as did a number of the older lads, and he agreed that he should stay, but the following morning he had changed his mind again and insisted he was going to find his family. We have not heard from him since, although at least this time he did not steal anything from anyone before leaving.

During the past few weeks we have also become aware of another Scottish couple working in the area trying to develop a project to help street kids. Adrian and Lynne Laikie are out in Zambia with their son Toby setting up a charity called Child First, which is registered in Scotland and aims to assist street kids by providing vocational training in areas such as mechanics, carpentry etc. What I found particularly interesting is the fact that they have been funded by the International Development Department of the Scottish Executive. I had not heard about this department - possibly a Scottish Foreign Office in themaking - if so, I will volunteer to be a Scottish Ambassador to Zambia! Education is the key to lifting these children out of poverty, and any funding used to do so is money well spent in my opinion. Adrian and Lynne have agreed co-operate with us so that we have a seamless link between the projects. We will continue to take boys off the street and socialise them, giving them education where possible. Once they have gone as far as they can in education, Child First will train them at the workshop they are setting up, and provide them with a means of making a living. This will be a real blessing as it will provide a stepping stone between the security of our project and the "real" world, and it should enable them to make a much smoother transition.

Then of course many of you will be aware of the write up we received from the Herald newspaper. We were contacted by a journalist called Susan Swarbrick who had seen a press release on my role in Zambian Airways. She thought this might make an interesting little piece for the lifestyle section in the Herald weekend magazine, and got in touch. We then met while we were home in Scotland in August, and the upshot was that she and a photographer, Simon, came out for a short visit. As well as collecting the information for the article, they took a keen interest in the boys and made friends with them. The article, which I thought was very good, has provoked a fair amount of interest in Scotland and we have had numerous emails from people who came across it, many asking how they can help, and wishing to be added to the mailing list for the newsletters. In addition, we have been asked to do a follow up program for Radio Scotland and in our homeland, the West Highland Free Press want to run a feature on us – all this fame is hard to take. The coverage seems to be

gathering momentum on its own and raising awareness of the whole street kids issue back home.

Both Christine and Sarah have had birthdays in the past 3 weeks, Christine turning 42 on 1 March and Sarah joining the ranks of the dreaded teenagers on 13 February – actually she does not seem any different – still the same dear girl she has always been. Rachel is hard at work in school, learning to read incredibly fast and determined to catch up with the rest of us as quickly as possible. She and Memory spend all their spare time playing together with never a problem, very much in keeping with the cute picture of them on the front of the Herald. Nico and Mulenga are working extremely hard at school, and getting very good results. They are all growing up so quickly it's hard to believe it. Now I understand why my own Dad and Mum used to say this about us when we were young and I thought growing up took for ever. Mind you, I am still in a state of shock after realising that should we make it to 9 July this year, Christine and I will have been married for 20 years – just does not seem possible but it's a fact.

It's now Friday 16th March – where does the time go? I had held off sending this to see if the opportunity was right to share an important bit of news with everyone, but it seems not yet. So I want to send this without further delay. By way of quick update, one of the lads who left to start up a business on his own seems to have fallen by the wayside. David, who is a very skilled carpenter, and has made some beautiful furniture, has spent a lot of money drinking and partying instead of setting up business. The other 3 lads seem to have settled down and are making an effort. Poor David was a great help to us over the 3 years he stayed, but struggled with a drug problem. There is not much we can do for him now – we have told him we will not give him any more money – other than pray he gets himself straightened out. We hope that as the cash runs out, and he faces reality, that he will take heart from what the other guys are achieving and start to work to lift himself. If not, there is little anyone can do. We have always known that we cannot change anybody. All we can do is give those who want to change themselves an opportunity to do so. But if someone does not want to change, we must accept that is his decision, and realise that he must conduct his life in the way he thinks best – it is after all his life not mine or yours. Moments like these bring a sense of failure

and despondency for us both, but we must also give thanks for the other 3 young men – Charles, Iwell and Martin - who do seem to be making some progress, though not without some difficulty.

Happier news is that Jonathan has got in touch again, and has arrived back in Lusaka, agreeing – yet again – that he made a mistake to leave! It was good to talk to him again, but we have agreed he must remain outside for some time yet. The situation which had developed between him and some of the other boys is a bit tricky, and if he was seen to come back in without any form of sanction for his bad behaviour, further resentment would flare up. As a compromise, we have agreed he will report back in 2 weeks to see if he is “serious” about changing his behaviour and staying for good this time. Once the other boys feel the point has been made, I am sure they will welcome him back.

Let me also give you some news of one of our sponsored pupils – a girl called Edna. She is part of SuperGran’s family, and has been provided for by a family in England. I know they wish to remain anonymous, but hope they will not mind me sharing this with you. I wrote to them recently:

“I wanted to let you know how well Edna is getting on. In Zambia school pupils sit national tests at the end of year 8 and year 10 (Grade 7 and Grade 9) to see who progresses to Junior High School then Senior High School. Edna sat the Grade 9 exam for SHS last November and has just received her results. She has done incredibly well. Across the country the pass rate is only 33%, with about 100,000 pupils sitting. The cut-off point - i.e. the pass mark to allow pupils to progress to SHS was 334 for girls and 376 for boys (the pass rate is lower for girls to try and redress the imbalance in opportunity that government believes exists in society). Edna came out number one in her school, and scored 529 and has been called to attend SHS. This puts her in the top 10% of the country this year. This shows what a difference support to such children can make in a short space of time. Given how well she has done and how hard she has tried, I feel we should send her to boarding school to give her the chance to fulfil her potential. There is a good one nearby called Ibex Hill Secondary and if she goes there she will be able to come to stay with us at weekends and we will be able to support her more. I feel it is important to give girls the chance as they are often treated as second class in Zambia.

Thank you so much for changing this young woman's life, self-esteem, and future chances.”

So life goes on! Full of ups and downs, while we are never sure what each day will bring. Thank you all for all your prayers and support - we really do feel the benefit of it though often do not have time to acknowledge it.

God bless

Don, Christine, Sarah, Rachel, Nicholas and Mulenga