

Dear everyone

Tuesday 12th December - I have decided to start this letter though I expect it will be some weeks before I complete it and send it. It should serve as a journal of our first few days in OMF. We completed the move yesterday - all our goods and chattels, plus family, comprising 6 MacDonalds, 2 visitors, 2 staff, 21 street kids, 13 boarding school kids now staying over the holidays, 4 dogs, 4 guinea pigs and 2 cats. It was some mission, but as ever friends came to the rescue, and we were offered 3 different trucks, so with all the hands to help it was reasonably painless - at least moving out was. As we waved the last consignment off, Christine and I took a last look around, and then drove off together to the new farm. As we were on the way the rains started, after a prolonged drought period, which was a great blessing for all the locals who depend on growing their own crops for food. And as we drove up to the farm we saw a beautiful rainbow ahead of us. Two minutes later however, all the romanticism of the moment disappeared as we realised that 36 young people between them had not realised that moving house meant putting anything actually inside the new house. In fact the littler boys were running around topless in the rain, rejoicing that it had come. Meanwhile, the bedding, furniture etc piled on the grass was getting soaked. We leapt from the car roaring, and a few minutes later most of it was under cover. The rain eventually stopped and we tried to get everything into some kind of order, but within about 30 minutes the electricity went off, and eventually we had to give up and go to bed. Today was better as we managed to get some degree of order in a couple of rooms.

Now it's Tuesday 20th December and we have been in the house for more than one week. We are slowly managing to get things into order, but we will need to build a couple of buildings to act as dormitories for the boys we have and some of the others we might take in later. We cannot do any of this just now as we will have to wait for the end of rains in February/March. At present we have 30 of us in the one house and the ten big boys staying in the servants' quarters. All the boys cook and eat together but at night they pile into 3 big rooms and sleep in assorted beds and on the floor. They are nearly sick with excitement at the thought of Santa coming visiting, and have to be re-assured that he will find the place even though we moved so recently. The one big drawback we face has been a crisis with the water supply. Two days into our stay here, it failed completely. We called out a plumber who said the problem was with the borehole, so he opened it up. It is a shaft which goes down about 80 meters, and it has a galvanized pipe down it through which the water is pumped. Except we discovered that the pipe which was used was not galvanized and had therefore rusted through, ready to break as soon as we moved in. Then the efforts to pull the pipe out resulted in the pump falling down the shaft and getting lost. So we bought a new pump and another set of pipes. But the pipes we were asked to get turned out to be too short, and then the old pump was found to be stuck in the shaft blocking it, so we needed specialist equipment to pull it out. All of this has meant we did not have water from Monday of last week until

today. The specialists who are supposed to sort everything out (we dispensed with the plumber last week) have now been here for 3 days, at a cost of £2,000, and have failed to retrieve the pump because a) the lifting gear broke, b) they were welding together again, and c) it was raining this morning! There are days when one could really fly off the handle. We are hoping and praying that today it will be sorted, but then we have been hoping that since early last week.

27th December - The water problem and work really occupied all our time over the past 2 weeks and before we knew what was happening, the festive season was upon us. This year we were asked by the Holiday Inn if we would assist in organising Christmas lunch for 150 street kids. The hotel kindly provided the venue, food and drink for free, and we were charged with inviting the kids, buying presents for them (paid for by Holiday Inn suppliers) and supervising them when they arrived. It was a huge task, and Christine seemed to spend forever buying clothes, toiletries, stationery and other things that would be of use to the children. Then we spent every waking moment not at work wrapping everything in preparation. But finally everything came together and it was a great event. The children gathered at the hotel and were sent for a shower and given a change of new clothes to wear. Afterwards they watched a video, then we had a huge buffet dinner served up by the hotel staff, complete with crackers and bags of sweets for everybody, and then it was time for Santa to arrive, complete with 8 legged reindeer and presents for each child. Lots of people assisted to make it truly memorable for the children, but the honours must surely go to the staff of the Holiday Inn who started out very doubtful of the idea of doing something for street children and ended up donating 5% of their Christmas bonus to help fund the event. Our own involvement on the day meant we had little time for relaxation. Christine ended up co-ordinating everybody, while I was detailed to supervise the showering along with a team of volunteers. The boys were really very well behaved. I then had to be one of the dining room monitors (which meant I got to eat first and boss everybody about - my dream job really) and spent most of the time passing up and down the rows of tables making sure the children behaved. There were a few very difficult moments but they all passed without mishap and we managed to keep order without having to carry out the threat of removing anyone. When it was all over, everybody left in good spirits, but it was strange to think that so many of the children were going back to sleep that night in the drains and under bridges. Hopefully the event showed them that some people care for them, even if it was only for one day. I think it was a great gesture by the Holiday Inn, and I hope that it will be the start of the corporate business world in Lusaka beginning to take an interest in the issue of destitute children in our city.

Earlier on in the day, we discovered that Santa had made a visit to Old MacDonald's Farm during the night and had left presents for everyone. I have never seen such agony of anticipation, and sheer unfettered excitement as I saw this year from 30 youngsters as they waited. One 15 year old asked rather sheepishly if 'Santa will bring something for the big boys like me, or is it just for the little ones?'. It is very moving

to see such longing for affirmation that they are worth something to somebody. On the actual morning, after a scare that perhaps Santa hadn't come because one of the bedroom doors had been locked, ³against Mum and Dad's rules², everybody found their parcels. I cannot describe it except to say the boys were bordering on the delirious. Clever old Santa had figured out that the best presents for ex-street boys included genuine fake football strips (Man Utd, Juventus, Real Madrid etc) little radios that doubled up as space invader games, torches, and toy mobile phones. We have since lived in a surreal world of jingles, ring tones and flashing lights from very early morning to very late at night.

Thankfully Santa left the extra batteries with me, so in a couple of days things should go back to normal as the devices run out of power. We also got a delivery of a couple of bikes with strict instructions that they were to be shared and that any boy who would not share would be struck off future present lists. I am sure the Politically Correct Thought Police would have poor old Santa done for scarring the kids for life by such mental abuse, but the threat has been enough to induce politeness almost to the extent of ³After you² ³No, no, after you² ³Really, I insist² Š. Our own children had a great time helping wrap for everyone else, and receiving their own gifts - Nico and Mulenga are at the ³money please² stage - and generally a good time was had by all except for one incident when Memory and Rachel nearly fell out over Memory's assertion to Rachel that Santa was dead!

1st January - Today is a public holiday of course so that was an excuse for a barbeque (or braai as it is called in southern Africa), with all the boys. We had a great feast followed by our customary camp fire where we all sit around in the evening and discuss the past year and hopes for the coming one. Some of the little stories and comments from the boys were very moving, including numerous assertions that they had never believed that they could be loved or have a family again. Hopes included the desire for good exam results at school, wishing to learn to drive, and one young man who wanted to learn to be ³a proper gentleman and a proper Christian². The boys also took time to remember and thank all the friends who support them in various ways, many of whom get these newsletters. So on their behalf, ³Thank you² to you all, and may 2007 be a blessed year for you.

Our friends in Kabwata Baptist Church have taken our project to their hearts, and have been supportive in so many ways. In particular a group of people have started coming to OMF on Sunday morning to hold a service in vernacular for the kids. It is really amazing to see the kids, some of whom were running wild on the street just months ago, sitting listening intently to the message, and asking questions afterwards.

8th January - Back to school with a bang! Now that the visitors have all gone we are 40 in total - the 4 people who arrived in Lusaka 5 years ago, plus Nicholas and Mulenga making 6 official MacDonalds - and 34 young people of various ages. Out of this total of 40, 29 started back in school today - Sarah and Rachel back to the Italian school, and 26 boys and 1 little girl - Memory - to Lusaka East where they will attend as day pupils. This school is the boarding school some of the boys attended

over the last 2 years and they have fairly basic facilities but produce very good academic results. At the end of year 8, Zambian children sit a national exam to get entry into secondary school, and this year Lusaka East was officially acclaimed the best school in the whole of the country in terms of results achieved. His was a tremendous performance, and even more exciting was the fact that we had 4 pupils involved, all of whom passed with flying colours. These are older children who have had no opportunity in life as they come from poor families, and their achievements were really commendable. Lucky (Memory's older brother) is with us all the time, and has become like a son, while Rabson, and Ackim, are now staying with us in term time, and go home at holiday time. Their excitement and wonder at their results was really touching. All three are sponsored by friends, and if the sponsors could have seen what it meant to the boys, they would have concluded their contribution was well worth the cost. Assisting a child in Africa is one way of having a positive impact on someone's life in a situation that would otherwise be hopeless. As we sat amongst the chaos trying to organise 29 people for school, I would be lying if I said I did not wonder if I was crazy, or at least attempting the impossible, but at last everybody had socks, PE kits, pens and pencils, exercise books and uniform as required, had eaten breakfast, and had set off walking. The neighbours had no doubt we were completely bonkers when they saw the crocodile of 27 kids setting out from one house. Christine organised the event with military precision, and it seems to have worked pretty well. Time will tell if we can keep it up.

23rd - a sad day today as one of our older boys, Jonathan, ran away after stealing some mobile phones from the others. He came in July, and is written about in my July letter. He has never really settled, and constantly talked about going into the far north of the country to find his family. What he cannot yet come to terms with is that his mother is dead, his father and step mother have disowned him, and the wider family simply don't want to know him. I fear for him, as he may actually reach the village, but will likely be roughly rejected again, which is likely to have a shattering effect on his hopes and dreams. He has called since he left, and we hope he will come back when he is ready to, but in the meantime we can only wait and pray for him. When a case like this happens, we feel upset as we wonder if we provoked the break, and feel quite discouraged, but we must keep going for the sake of those who have stayed and still need us. We also try and remain as open minded and open hearted as possible, since we do not really know what the children have gone through, but truly believe we can help by being welcoming if they want to come back. Poor Johnny, I hope we don't lose him altogether. Life has been so bad for him, and is not likely to get any better along the road he is trying to take.

Well, now its Saturday 27th and we are nearly at the end of January. I want to send this off as soon as possible so will try and wrap up just now. We are settling into a routine for the boys, and they seem to have adapted to school very well. They are all making encouraging progress and behaviour is slowly improving, though we still have a lot of bickering and competition between them, and the level of noise is often

unbearable. But we cannot help loving them most of the time, though sometimes we feel overwhelmed by everything. Work has been very difficult, especially for me, and we have both had some health issues, but we do feel we need to push on with the work with the children and we have had many offers of help and kind support from so many folk that we feel we must go forward at all costs.

1 February - just before sending this wanted you all to know that Jonathan has phoned to say that he ³has made a big mistake and can I come home². We are very happy to hear from him, and will welcome him back, in the hope that he learns his lesson.

So on behalf of us all, I wish you all a successful, prosperous and blessed 2007.

With all our love

Don, Christine, Sarah, Rachel, Nicholas and Mulenga