

Dear All

The end of February beckons and I need to get back to the laptop and tell you all that has happened since November when I last wrote. Looking over that email it seems that everything was reasonably hopeful with all the boys and girls (and adults) looking forward to Christmas and a New Year beginning. The weather was hot and wet and the crops were being planted and school terms were coming to an end. Looking back now it seems like a very peaceful, innocent time compared to now. Since then on the countrywide scale, Zambia has had huge rainfall, so much that many crops have been ruined and homes washed away in the floods which resulted. Again we see how tenuous the grasp on life here is. The rainfall in Lusaka area has been double the amount for the whole of last year so far. Despite the problems and the resultant hunger which may come, the economy continues to do well, and we see new developments springing up every week. My venture into the hardware/DIY market has gone well, so well in fact that we are planning to expand and open a second store in a town called Kitwe in the Copperbelt area in the north of Zambia.

From our family point of view, we have enjoyed many blessings and encouragements. Most of our lads finished the Zambian school year in December with honour and passed into the next class. Two others managed to get apprentice posts with the main Nissan dealership in Lusaka, and will train as mechanics. Sarah and Rachel did extremely well in their mid year exams (how can you give a seven year old exams!), and on a family and personal basis we have been truly blessed. Christmas was a great time for everyone and we had various functions for different groups of street children and poor families, ably assisted by the Holiday Inn as last year. We were visited by Christine's mother, whom the boys regarded with a mixture of curiosity, respect, and amazement – she did not understand half of what they said and they understood less than half of what she said – and when she spoke to them in Gaelic, they collapsed laughing. They were particularly intrigued that an old lady could read! We also enjoyed visits from Janet Logue and Christina Macritchie (my cousin) who is actually still here. Janet is a social worker from Edinburgh, and was really a great help while she was here. She was teased mercilessly for her “social work speak” – as when she described Christina as “having nose issues” after a sneezing fit – and I am pleased to report

that she went home with several “issues” of her own – but she took it all in good grace and teased back. I even discovered I had several issues including realising how good it would be to have someone who cared for the children and had some proper social work training working with us here. She was able to help a number of the boys with some of the real and painful problems they face following rejection and neglect by their families. So Janet, hurry back whenever you can – we all miss you. Then of course there is Christina, who has become a part of the family, and Christine's right hand woman in handling the smaller children – and the object of much romantic attention from the older boys. She went back to Scotland for New Year, but came back again, and resumed where she left off – in her first 3 days she broke as many cups and glasses, and has now earned the name “Crashtina”. She spends so much time helping the boys with homework and being sister to the younger girls it's hard to imagine how we got by without her.

Our project with the boys has also been recognised on a wider scale. We have been visited by Child Protection Unit officers who stated that our model is one they wish to see implemented in Government efforts to deal with street children. I have also been invited to go to Botswana to address the government there on our project. All of this needs time to deal with, and while it is tempting to think that we might influence how a country deals with street children, I am sure I do not want to spend time on committees discussing endlessly and achieving nothing. Our efforts have also been recognised within Zambia by Celtel – the largest mobile phone company in Africa. They have started a television program called “Touching Lives” which takes stories of ordinary people who have overcome difficulty or helped other people to do so. Many of the people featured are real life heroes, quietly doing what they can and it is nice to see them being recognised. However, in order to launch the start of the program, Celtel decided to make special awards to 3 people who typified what they wanted to see happening. We were notified that they had decided to make an award to Christine and me for our work with the street kids. We were invited to attend an awards dinner with Mr Banda and 7 of the boys who got all dressed up for the occasion, and looked brilliant. We got a reserved table right at the front and had to walk in on a red carpet then go up on the stage to get the award – it felt like the Oscars!

However as I look back over the past 3 months, my overall feeling is one of failure and difficulty, at least as far as our work with the boys is

concerned. It has been so bad at times that I have really wondered if I personally can keep going with what we are trying to do. It is hard to know where to begin with it all. Firstly, we have lost 5 boys who have decided to run away. The first to go was little Steve who is about 11 and is suspected to be autistic. He just went to school one day and at home time took off to town. He has not been seen since and is reputedly in Kitwe. Then our terrible twosome – Little John and Jeremiah – decided to do a bunk, again from school. They are now in a drop in centre in town, back to the old life of glue and begging, though we have not seen them out and about. This was followed by Matthias, one of the older boys telling us he wanted to leave. We found his leaving the hardest to take, as he has been with us over 3 years, and seemed to be settled and happy in every way. He was one of the nicest boys we had helped, and was incredibly helpful around the house. He said he needed to go back to see his old Grandmother who was sick and blind and is his only relative. He has been concerned about her for a long time and spent the Christmas holidays with her. He also got money from us to go and see her every second or third weekend and buy her food. When he said he wanted to go, we said we would have to deliver him to his Grandmother if he was leaving us for good. But when Mr Banda took him to her house in Lusaka West, she saw him on the path (so much for being blind) and ran to him exclaiming, “Matthias, I thought I was going to die before I saw you again.” It turns out not only is she not blind, but Matthias did not spend the holidays or the weekends with her, and she received none of the money we sent. We have no idea where he spent the time or the money. She and Matthias’ aunties (more relatives) tried to reason with him to stay in school where he is on grade 7 and has his exams for entry into secondary in December, but to no avail. He claimed he wanted to work with his brother in a dangerous part of town, but whether he will or if his brother even exists, we don’t know. Finally Evans, one of the older boys we took from National Service training camp and gave a job as a farm worker decided to leave, and took the tools the government provided him with. These were sold to buy a mobile phone, and some driving lessons. To make matters worse, he then complained to the labour office that we had not paid him the money he was due when he was working for us, so now we have to defend ourselves in a case investigation. Up till now we have enjoyed a very low runaway rate and this is one of the features that has lead people to start examining what we are doing. Now of course we have to face the reality that not all our boys want to stay after all, and deal with the sense of failure and rejection that brings, but most difficult of all is the sense of sorrow and

loss when one of them goes, as they have all become very dear to our hearts and are part of our lives.

Then there is the case of David. He was one of the oldest boys we took in at the beginning, and he trained as a carpenter. He had a bad drug problem with cannabis. Eventually he got restless and decided to move out after 4 years with us. He then proceeded to mess up his life completely and lost just about everything we gave him. Anyway, at the end of it all, last April he was accused of raping (defiling they call it here) a little girl of 7. We could not believe he would as he was so good with our own girls and Memory. He was falsely accused and was eventually cleared at trial – but not before he spent 9 months in a remand prison. We were so happy when he was released and came back to us just before Christmas. He was so glad to be free but eventually the whole experience took his toll on him and he has been getting more and more depressed, then 2 weeks ago he said he wanted to leave and run away somewhere where he was not known. He said this was because he kept hearing people accusing him of defiling the little girl in the townships, and since I had taken him back, I was accused of being involved in the original crime and in covering up for him. It all got too much for him, and he became more worked up and eventually said he was useless and he just wanted to kill himself. We tried reasoning him, but I know from experience this doesn't work. Christine managed to get him to see a doctor who said he was so suicidal he needed to see a psychiatrist, which he absolutely refused to do because he “was not mad, just needing to die”. Anyway last week he seemed a lot calmer and just said he wanted to go but would not harm himself, so as we have no power to keep him against his will, we had to let him go. At 8pm we got a call from an unknown woman saying she was with David and he had tried to kill himself by drinking insecticide. She had managed to pull the stuff from him and throw it away but they needed help because they were restraining him. So Phil and I rushed off to the darkest end of town to a foul, dark Dickensian hell hole, where we picked him up and took him to the local psychiatric hospital. We spent ages looking for anyone who could admit him, and ended up waiting for the doctor on call in a huge secure ward with some of the poor inmates shouting to us and one who kneeled in front of me and prayed because he thought I was an angel since I was white.

When we eventually saw the doctor he was quite thorough and said David was depressed and this is what had caused his suicidal tendencies. He said

they would admit him – in a private ward – and treat him for 7 days and then see. He and the nurse left to get the drugs, and David, who had been sitting quietly, saw his chance, and made a bolt for freedom. They had left the secure door open, and he punched one of the people I brought with me, and fled leaving his T shirt in our hands. Phil chased him in the car and got ahead of him at the hospital gates and tried to cut him off, at which point David approached with a brick and said he was going to kill Phil. He got out and ran like one possessed (which he probably was). We looked for him but couldn't find him in the dark, and I went home sure I had seen the last of him and that he would be dead before morning. I cannot tell you what it felt like. I couldn't sleep, and then about 1 am, Christine heard someone knocking on the gate. I went to see and it was David in a taxi, asking if he could come back in. So at least he was alive and I let him in not knowing if he was going to finish me off or what. But he went off to bed quietly enough, and we tried to sleep, but the night turned into a furious thunderstorm with torrential rain, lightening and wind as if the furies of hell were raging at us all. He is still with us and we are trying to keep him occupied, but every now and then he will lapse again into talking about dying. We cannot get him to agree to go for treatment and he is not willing to trust us after the episode at the hospital. So we go from day to day trying to keep an eye on him but not knowing what will happen.

All of this turmoil and emotional upheaval brings its own pressures and we have grown very weary. Sleep has become difficult, and we find we are constantly tired and trying to catch up. It also becomes difficult to concentrate on issues at work. At present Christine has managed to take a break in Scotland as she accompanied her mother back to Inverness so I am very glad she has managed to get a way for a few days and will enjoy visiting family and friends again. Thankfully I have a wonderful team of friends and helpers here who have taken over a lot of what Christine does and have made her absence bearable for us all. I have to give special mention to Phil and Christina, true work-fellows, and so far we have muddled through though we often sit at the end of the day and wonder how Christine manages all she does.

Amongst it all I must be honest and say that I wonder sometimes if we made the right decision to try to help so many youngsters. It just looks so enormous sometimes and when we see them going back to the street where they came from, I cannot help ask if it is worth it. I also seriously wonder

if it is sustainable. Anyhow, I do not wish to end on a negative note, especially when we have had so much support and prayer from so many wonderful friends. Without you we would have given up long ago, so I ask you please to keep us in your mind and prayers so that we might choose the right way ahead for us all.

With much love from us all

Don, Christine and all the children

PS Since writing the above, we have had a serious development in David's case. On Friday 29<sup>th</sup> February he was paid as it was month end. He went out and got very drunk then came home and made a further attempt to end his life by slashing his wrist with a broken piece of glass. I was called to help and found him pumping blood from an artery all over the floor of his room and wailing that he just wanted to die. Phil and I tied a tourniquet around his arm and rushed him to a nearby hospital where they stitched the wound and stopped the bleeding. All throughout the time we had to keep him pinned down as he struggled and moaned, asking us to kill him. The hospital staff were superb and arranged for a psychiatric consultation the following day. The psychiatrist seems to have got through to him and while his wrist is healing has arranged to have a number of sessions with him to discover the reasons underlying his depression. Please pray he will be healed from the mental trauma he is going through, and that his life will be redeemed rather than destroyed.