

Dear All

Hello again from Lusaka where we are enjoying the cool of “winter” in the southern hemisphere. We are all busy with our lives and work and I note that that last time I wrote was March. I have been more than occupied with the airline, and I am glad to tell you that we have managed to start up our low cost carrier to Johannesburg reasonably successfully. I have also been able to recruit a Financial Director and a new assistant in my office which has lessened my workload somewhat. Christine has continued with her consulting on medical issues, and the children have all reached the end of term. Sarah and Rachel have finished another school year, and in August will start Secondary 2 and Primary 2 respectively – that cannot be right surely? Nicholas is in the middle of the Zambian school year in Standard 8 (Secondary 3) and Mulenga, who is now one of the family and awaiting formal adoption, is on Standard 6. Both Nicholas and Mulenga have started day school now instead of boarding. They are very happy to be home every night for Mum’s cooking and their own bedroom – and we are really happy to have them back all the time. We missed them terribly while they were away, and although they needed the discipline of boarding school for a while, they did not really enjoy it and we felt the gap left in the family when they were not there. The matter was taken out of our hands as the ongoing strengthening of the kwacha against the dollar meant that we simply were not able to pay the boarding fees any more. This has been a problem now for about 6 months, and we do apologise to those of you who have been good enough to sponsor different children only to be told that we need to ask for more money than we had estimated at the beginning of the year.

We have all settled in very well to our new house. The last time I wrote, we had just moved and were in some chaos. Thankfully our new place is very nice and seems to suit everyone, and since it is cold season we don’t miss the pool. Our lads are all settled into their regular routines, and are occupied productively. Smart, who left recently to start life on his own, is now working for a local taxi driver, and seems to be making ends meet though it is a struggle. Independence is the ultimate goal for all of them, and that involves a lot of hard work on their part. First they have to adapt to a new way of life with us when coming off the street. Then they have to overcome drug habits, and learn to live with others in peace. Then they have to learn the discipline of work or study, and learn a new skill or trade. Then they have to become proficient in what they have chosen to do, and start earning money. And finally, just when they have mastered all of this, they have to face the prospect of leaving the relative security of our compound, and move into the mainstream of a society which rejected and abused them in the first place, and which makes no allowances for all they have been through. They stand in danger every day of being seduced by drugs or sex, cheated by crooks, despised by mean spirits who cannot get past their street background or hurt by those who are jealous of what they have achieved. Richard, the boy who left with Smart, has come back to stay with us as he was unable to cope on his own. Thankfully he remained clean of drugs, but he could not make enough money to survive, and was in danger of becoming malnourished, so we gladly accepted him back. He is now plying his carpentry skills in our little workshop which is run by David. David is a very interesting case study in his own right. He is 22 and had been on the street for

years before he moved in with us 2 years ago. He had a major drug habit with cannabis, but was a calming influence on the street amongst the other boys. When I used to feed them in the evenings, David was the guy who made them all line up nicely and wait in turn, and the smaller boys all testify that he protected them from bullying by bigger boys. In fact, the very first thing that Nicholas did when he got his first pocket money was to walk to Manda Hill, find David, and give the money to him. David moved in with us some months later, and has always been helpful, responsible and respectful. We had very high hopes of his progress and sent him to train in carpentry school, where he finished with top marks. Just about a year ago, while attending school, his behaviour began to deteriorate, and we discovered he was still secretly smoking cannabis – or dagga as it is called here. All our attempts to persuade him to stop failed, and he told us one day that “even if Jesus told me to stop smoking dagga, I cannot”. We were afraid that we might have to ask him to leave, but we prayed over the matter and I tried to counsel him with the help of Mr Banda. We did not say anything different from before, but David appears to have taken it to heart, and apart from a couple of lapses, has been clean ever since. Whether Jesus was involved or not, I leave you to decide for yourselves – personally I have no doubt he was. In any case David is now the owner of a flourishing carpentry business called Master Carpenter, and has been receiving orders from people who are amazed at the quality of the furniture he produces. And as a little side note, he has decided to give casual employment to younger boys with drug problems, who now come and assist him in sanding and preparing wood. He teaches them some of his skills, and pays them for their efforts so that they do not have to beg. In short he has started his own rehabilitation project, though I don't think he realises it yet.

After a lot of thought, I agreed to appear on local TV so Nicholas, Mulenga, David and Joseph joined me on the couch to be interviewed on the Saturday morning live chat show. They all dressed up nicely, and wore shirts and ties – I got ready to leave in a T-shirt, and they told me to go and change to make myself look smart! It went very well and the guys were very forthcoming about what their lives had been like in the past and what they are now. Another lad, Martin, who is very bright and articulate, joined me on a radio interview, and when he was asked why the boys stayed with “MacDonald” when they had run away from so many other centres, he said “What makes the difference is when we know the Boss and Madam love us”. I get choked even thinking about it now, and a couple of people actually called the programme to say how moved they were by his testimony. We got a lot of positive feedback, and no negative comments, and since these programmes, we have heard of two orphaned children being adopted by families who had been considering doing so but only took the plunge after hearing our experiences.

One of these families is a couple called Shri and Louise. Shri is an education expert from Canada and working with Zambian government, while his wife Louise is English and a special needs teacher. They have a small daughter called Jasmin and have taken on a little boy called Charles, who is 3. Louise has also been an amazing help with teaching the boys at our house. She came to Christine as a patient and when she heard about the boys we looked after, asked if she could come and visit. She said she was rather nervous because of her experience with

disruptive children in Britain, but during her visit the boys charmed her and she fell in love with them! As a result she has given up 4 afternoons every week to come and help them with reading and school work. She has made an incredible difference to many of them, and now they refer to her fondly as Auntie Louise. Thanks to her patient teaching, 4 additional boys - 2 of whom stay with us and 2 who stay with their families - have been able to get places in school. One of these boys is Danny, the older boy we took in at New Year. Louise felt a special attachment to him, and he has been able to go back to school after missing 2 years and acquit himself very well thanks to her help. We have also enjoyed having a 19 year old student from England staying with us for the past 3 months. Rupert – or Loopat as most of the boys call him – is due to go to University in September. His Dad spent some time out with us last year and Rupert decided to join us during his long break and spend his time helping Louise and assisting the boys with reading and homework studies. Rupert left yesterday so the house is much quieter, and the boys realise they are missing a good friend.

Amongst the rest of our extended family, Phil Bailey is back in Lusaka and working hard on his various projects. He continues to be a source of help and encouragement to us, and it is so good to have someone else around who feels so much the way we do about the street kids and the way forward. The new house has a small guest wing which we have allocated to Phil for when he is in town, and he is very happy to have a base to leave his stuff while he is away. He continues to discuss our idea of a small farm which we could use to accommodate many more boys and set up a training facility, and as we see more and more children abandoned on the street, we think this must be the way forward. A local estate agent who read the article in the Post, called me out of the blue one day and suggested they donate a fixed amount of about \$10 to our project for every sale they make. I was touched that she would think of helping, as her office is at Manda Hill, the shopping complex where most of the boys seem to gather. Then just last week she called again suggesting we needed a bigger place and saying she would look out for something suitable, and 5 days later phoned saying she had found somewhere, with 5 acres of land, a big house, and cottages that could do for the boys to live in. I was very grateful at her concern, but had to point out that we were getting a bit ahead of ourselves as we did not have the \$200,000 (£100,000) asking price!!

We have found more and more quiet, sincere support forthcoming from the business community and individuals recently, perhaps as a result of the media exposure. For example, a Muslim baker gives us all the bread we require for the children, a local farm donates all the vegetables we need every week and a local soap company provides us with donations of washing powder. Even more heartening, some people in the local church seem to be moved and two young folk in particular have come forward and spent time with the boys on a regular basis. Simply offering friendship and acceptance is often the best gift you can give the boys, so no special skills are needed to work with them – just an open heart and willingness to give up your time.

Super Gran is making great progress with her orphan grandchildren. They all look better fed and happy these days, and SG has decided to channel her energy into new challenges. Having the kids eat every day means she can now concentrate on doing business so she has asked us for a small loan to let her buy second hand clothes which she will then sell in the local markets. This will allow her to break out of the cycle of poverty and the amount involved is only about \$100 so we consider it well worth the outlay. The difference which this small (to us) amount can make in this old lady's life continues to challenge us about how we are stewarding the resources we have been blessed with. Honestly it makes you think when you spend more than that on one night in a hotel, or on some "business" dinner.

I have been offered a weekly radio programme which I have not yet agreed to and I have still no real clarity on whether I should take up the offer of a weekly newspaper column. As each week passes, I am often glad I have not started, though the problem of street kids is exploding before our eyes. Clearly something needs to be done urgently. About 1 year ago, we had removed a lot of the children from the streets at Manda Hill, but over the last 12 months the number has been growing and growing, with some of them as young as 6. Last Sunday Christine decided enough was enough, and invited them all for lunch so we could get to know them. What followed was a remarkable, if heart-breaking experience, and probably needs a separate letter of its own, so I will tell you about it next time.

In the meantime, God's blessing on you all,

With all our love

Don, Christine, Sarah, Rachel, Nicholas and all the young folk