

Dear All

We are now into the really hot part of the year in Zambia, and the temperatures have soared over the past three weeks. The rest of November will get hotter and more humid until hopefully the rains will start at the beginning of December. This is a crucial time for the locals as if the rains fail, the majority of Zambians will face severe hunger in the coming year, so all across the country many people are praying that the planting would go well and that the rains would arrive as expected, though over the last few years they have become much more erratic, and this has been put down to global warming. It certainly makes us think when we live in a society so dependant on the seasons, and brings home to us how tenuous our grip on life as human beings really is.

There has been a lot happening amongst the boys. First up must be the story of Jonathan – which seems to have taken a serious turn for the worse. As I mentioned in my last letter, he had agreed to go into a drug rehab project run by an American lady. The programme there insists on coming off drugs completely and you get one chance to clean up. Well, when we took Jonathan there he was searched and discovered to have supplies of drugs sewn into the pockets of his jeans. This is not unusual so he was allowed to continue with the programme, after the drugs were confiscated. It is usual for the addicts to go through some very bad times as they come off the drugs, and Jonathan was no exception to this. However what we did not foresee was that he would become a gangleader amongst the other inmates. It emerged that he had been a dealer while on the street and even while staying with us, and that he had a number of criminal contacts, whom he somehow managed to contact while he was in rehab. As a result he began to bring drugs in to the centre. When this was discovered, he was challenged by Carol the lady who runs the centre and he assaulted her. The same day, as some of the young girls in the centre were coming in from a supervised trip out, Jonathan and his gang made a break for freedom, and after attacking the girls to create a diversion, ran out the gate and disappeared. Not unreasonably, Carol has refused to take him back and he is now being sought by the police. He turned up two days later at our gate asking for help again, but in the light of his behaviour we simply were not prepared to allow him back in with us. It was a difficult decision for us, as we have spent so much time with him, and still regard him as a

desperate, wasted, sad individual rather than a villain, but the risks for our family and the other boys are just too great. And whether we like or not, he is now a criminal on the run from the police, and we could not shelter him in defiance of the authorities. When we told him we could not keep him any more, he sat outside with his head in his hands for hours, before finally disappearing. So the whole chapter of Jonathan looks like is closed for our little project. There is now nothing more we can do for him except to pray that he would be rescued by God himself. For him however the tragedy continues and he faces a life outside the law, an outcast except amongst his fellow dealers, living off the misery and addiction of others, an existence characterised by violence, deceit and betrayal, and in all likelihood an early and painful death, before finally meeting the consequences of his choices. Against this sort of tragedy, I find it hard to believe that there are still people who maintain that cannabis is not a dangerous drug. Maybe not all users are affected in the same way, but try telling Jonathan – or any of his victims – that it is harmless.

Amongst the other boys, we have recently brought back John, Isaiah and Patrick. These three boys were part of Jonathan's gang while he was here, although we did not realise the extent of the hold he had over them. As a result they were regular users of dhagga without our knowledge. When we realised what was happening we expelled all three of them. Just a couple of weeks ago, John came to see us asking for another chance, closely followed by Patrick, then finally Mr Banda met Isaiah at a drop in centre. He was horrified at his appearance, emaciated and dirty after his time on the street. We took him in and got him cleaned up and fed, then agreed with all three of them that they could come and work on a daily basis for a few weeks until we saw if they had really changed and were prepared to stay clean from drugs. They earn enough to stay together and have so far been reasonably conscientious at reporting for work and behaving. Please pray for them as they struggle between the "Jonathan" option and coming back to stay with us. As Christine says at least while they work with us we know now that they get fed twice a day and have a roof over their heads.

The boys who stay with us full time have had a very good two months, and the transformation in them all over the last year is amazing. When we look at them compared to Jonathan or Isaiah, the contrast is even more startling. Most of them have done very well in school, and face the end of year exams with justifiable confidence. Even the most reserved of them has made great progress and is now noticeably more comfortable with us.

In particular I would like to mention Wisdom, a very badly abused little boy, and Joseph, who was a deeply miserable, depressed kind of lad. Both of them now smile and joke and laugh, and Joseph even told Christine recently “Ah Mammy I feel happy today!” Those of you who have met him will know just what an amazing development that is. Our older boys are growing into pleasant, responsible young men and the littler ones are settling into family life and making progress in almost every way. There are of course the usual stresses and strains of having so many teenagers and children around the place, and no doubt, after sending this letter many of them will have a wobble or throw a tantrum just to keep us from becoming complacent, but all in all they are a very nice bunch of youngsters to have around and they seem to grow more appreciative of what we are trying to do as they get older.

At evening prayers we decided recently to have a hot seat in which each boy would take a turn and tell us all about his life, why he ended up on the street and how he came to stay with us. The stories have been heart-rending and in some cases, stomach turning, when we hear of the abuse the boys suffered from those who should have known better before they left for the street. The acknowledgement of what was done to them seems to have helped many of them, and also made them more sympathetic to each other. I plan to collect these stories and record them separately and I believe they will make a riveting if harrowing read. Suffice it to say they have reduced the adults present to stunned and often tearful silence.

With the rains imminent we are also thinking of planting and have been looking at acquiring another piece of land in order to grow more maize. The plot next door looked as if it would become available for sale and some generous friends offered to provide the asking price. However when the owner heard we were interested, the price went up and continues to do so, so we wait to see if they really are willing to sell. The family living there have been rather difficult neighbours as the old grandmother brews local beer which she then sells along with the local cannabis (illegally). She sells to anybody including school children and has been remonstrated with by local people who are unhappy with what she is doing, but her response is that this is how she makes a living. Needless to say, her merchandise has been a great source of temptation to our lads and we have had several instances where she has passed beer and drugs through the fence to them. Buying her out seemed like a great idea, but her son who holds the title deeds is holding out for now.

Our project to build a dormitory for the boys has been put on hold as Jim Burnett, our contractor (who is from Georgia, NOT Texas), has been asked to help out getting the Mica hardware shop ready in time. He and his gang have been working round the clock, and it looks as if we will be ready to open on 5th December as scheduled. I had a staff meeting with the folks we have employed and they seem an enthusiastic and capable bunch of people. They astounded me by suggesting – unanimously – that we begin each business day with morning prayers, and have committed to coming in 15 minutes earlier to do so! Getting everything ready on time will be a challenge, but with the team spirit they are showing I believe we will succeed.

The cost of the dormitory has escalated to approximately US \$60,000. We did not have this kind of money, but as has happened so often in the past, just when we did not know how to proceed, we got a message offering us the money we needed. I am almost embarrassed telling yet another story of marvellous provision – there seems to be so many of these “co-incidences” and I feel sometimes it must sound like I am making them up, or at least sending begging letters out. But I am not, and the funds appear every time, just as they are needed, without telling anyone but God.

Over the past weeks we had tremendous help from two ladies from Scotland. Joy Mackenzie took early retirement from Dobbies Garden Centres where she was Director of Catering and came out to help for 6 weeks. She was an incredible help as she was able to put a little project together encouraging our staff to make cakes, biscuits and bread to sell at the local craft markets. They have proved extremely popular, and made some profit for the folks involved. Unfortunately we need help to manage to entire process as it is too much for Christine to take on in addition to her present workload. However we have managed to set up a little shop at the gate to sell baking and farm produce and one of the boys will run it so I hope this will be successful. If we had a manager to run the enterprise, I believe we could set up a proper little bakery with industrial ovens etc, and would be able to generate a lot of income to support the projects we are involved in. We have also had Christina – my little cousin – out on a gap year visit, and she has been great fun, helping the little boys with reading and sums, and generally keeping everyone cheerful – apart from an unfortunate tendency to drop dishes - usually behind me - so she can watch me jump out of my skin.

Of course we are now also gearing up for the end of another year and the usual celebrations, and the children are all giddy at the thought of Santa coming again. The little ones are going out of their way to be noticed being “good”, while the older ones act cool, but are not above trying the same trick albeit a bit more subtly. I am giddy at the thought of how much needs to be done, but I am sure it will be wonderful as usual, especially watching the faces of kids who never had a present before in their lives.

So another month slides by, and another year is almost gone. It is hard to believe how fast it goes, but we do thank you all for the great interest you take in the lads and for making it possible to continue with them. I will probably write again early in the New Year, so tillthen, God bless you and yours,

Love

Don, Christine and all the children