

# **I'M LEAVING MY HEART HERE**

**by**

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In December of 2008 I was faced with a difficult choice, either to canoe the Zambezi, camping on the river banks, or fly to Zambia with a British charity, the Soapbox Trust, and assist on a building project. After much heart-searching I thought that serving the poor people of a developing nation should be my highest priority.

I joined a team of twelve volunteers of mixed ages at Gatwick Airport in mid-July of 2009 and flew to Johannesburg for a connecting flight to Ndola. We would assist an organisation named Mechanics for Africa, abbreviated to MFA, in the building of a guest house. Hopefully this would generate funds to finance a workshop offering two year training courses to young Zambians.

Founded in 2002 by Charlie Watts, a British metallurgist, the workshop takes twenty students per year who work towards their City and Guilds in Motor Mechanics. Past examination results were impressive by any standard, most students passing with distinction, I later learned.

At the MFA site our project leader directed me to a vacant computer room smelling of dust, where I spread my sleeping bag on the floor. Each weekday a charming local woman cooked the team's meals, her kitchen oozing with tantalising smells. Through her culinary skills we acquired a taste for nsima, a staple food made from powdered maize.

The foundations of the four room guest house were already in position, we found, in a pleasant location shaded by tall pines. Here I was introduced to the site supervisor, a Zambian with dark twinkling eyes, known by the unlikely name of Fred.

In no time the work-site echoed to the tapping of trowel handles, but first the team formed a chain gang, moving building blocks to the work areas, followed by the carting of sand for making cement. When the mix was ready, under Fred's supervision, the team laid course after course as the sun climbed higher into a wide opalescent sky.

The second week in Ndola was much like the first, and seven more courses were laid. Metal door frames were used to deter termites. The organisation managers were pleased with the team's progress and although the guest house wasn't completed, it reached rafter level. Local craftsmen would finish the work.

On two afternoons certain team members visited Isubilo Community Centre which provides relief for malnourished children, and orphans. Three colleagues organised games for boisterous youngsters while two others and myself accompanied a social worker, Jimmy, in visiting HIV sufferers. A rewarding few hours, indeed.

We tramped powdery streets bordered by rundown single-storey block dwellings where the HIV victims lay on thin foam mattresses, on concrete floors, smelling of neglect. In turn, we all talked with them. Jimmy left medication and basic foodstuffs in grateful hands. All seemed pleased to meet their British guests.

Financed by the Danish government, the final week was spent at Kaniki Bible College near the Ndola city boundary. Here the team renewed the water-damaged ceiling of a laundry room, repaired torn insect screens. I supervised a group in giving a face-lift to the ceiling of a 40m long arcade. It was a frustrating job, the colour of the hardboard ceiling bleeding through the freshly applied coats of emulsion. On the third day enquiries revealed that the hardboard had been treated with oil to prevent termite damage.

One afternoon Cliff, a bright-eyed Brit, drove me into the bush to show the practical help given to isolated communities by the college. I saw new grass roofs on simple homes, some built for widows, learned of medicine distribution. Everyone greeted us warmly.

After weeks of grafting, our aching muscles craved for relaxation. Charlie, from MFA, arranged for the team to spend a few days at a bush village, some 160 kms from the nearest town.

We arrived late afternoon. I tumbled from our Land Rover to the sound of blood-curdling screams. Alarmed, I ran past grass-roofed huts towards the agonising sound, to find village men sawing through the throat of a large pig. A steel drum of steaming water was sitting on a aromatic-smelling wood fire. When the animal had choked on its own blood, the hot water was poured over its skin and the bristles were scraped off.

My colleagues and I were allocated a mud-block shack with a red dirt floor on which to sleep; good-bye to electricity, running water and a bathroom for three days. However, the lack of facilities enabled everyone to sample the real Africa experience.

A full programme kept the team busy, organising art and craft classes, football games. Our project leader gave an enlightening homily on the worth of children. Many Africans regard additions to their family simply as extra mouths to feed.

My interest focused on medical facilities, so I made enquiries. A clinic was situated 5 km away, I heard. An old Africa hand told me this story. 'One

evening a man gnashed his foot badly, lost a lot of blood and fainted. He was carried to the clinic to discover that electricity and anaesthetics were unavailable.

'By candlelight a nurse dabbed musky iodine onto the now festering wound and stitched it as the injured man screamed in agony. Hospitalisation would have meant a 160 km journey, crossing a river by rusty pontoon and taking one of two weekly buses to the nearest town.' I considered myself lucky to have the much-maligned NHS at my disposal in England.

At the end of the third week the team reluctantly left Ndola. One member said, 'I feel as though I'm leaving my heart here,'

We all echoed that sentiment.

The warmth and friendliness of the Zambian people made an overwhelming impact on us. Our lifestyles were challenged, our lives enriched by forgoing our materialistic values for a short time and seeing life from an African perspective.

As for canoeing down the Zambezi, it would have given an adrenaline-rush, but working for the under-privileged was intensely rewarding, something I look forward to doing again.

John Parsons

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