Malawi 2013 – Joshua Orphan and Community Care Project

Described as “The Warm Heart of Africa”, Malawi is situated in south-east Africa and is home to some of the most idyllic landscapes, beautiful people, and not forgetting, the ninth largest lake in the world – Lake Malawi. Around twelve million people live there, some in cities like the capital, Lilongwe, and many in isolated, rural villages. This summer, with the help received by the Expeditions Fund, I was fortunate enough to spend a month living and working in a community called Manyowe. The children of communities like these are heavily reliant on the ‘feeding centres’ run by the community themselves, providing education and for many of them, their one meal of the day - a bowl of porridge. Volunteers, like myself, were brought there by an organization called “Quest Overseas” in partnership with “Joshua Orphan and Community Care (JOCC)”, in order to build a new feeding centre, providing support and a safe place for the children to develop.

Joshua Orphan and Community Care is a Malawi-based charity set up by a woman named Winnie Kapalamula, – an eccentric Malawian woman - who we had the pleasure of meeting whilst we spent time there. In 1998, she was joined by a British woman named Sylvia Avgherinos, who now runs the projects on Winnie’s behalf. Joshua works specifically in nineteen rural communities surrounding Malawi’s largest city, Blantyre. Blantyre remains the main ‘industrial hub’ producing tea and coffee to rubber and textiles to tobacco that can be transported, not only within Africa but internationally. Despite the economic boost within Blantyre, communities surrounding this city remain in a state of poverty - lacking electricity, running water and mosquito nets used in prevention of malaria. It is not surprising that life expectancy in these parts is 37 years, an age that seems remarkably low to people, like myself, living in London, however, something that is all too familiar in communities like Manyowe. Joshua works by supporting these communities in sustainable development projects to assist HIV/AIDS orphans, vulnerable children and their families. It recognizes the importance of early childhood development and how fundamental feeding centres are essential as an environment for which the children can be free from hunger, with access to education.

The development of the feeding centre, or Community Based Child-Care Centre (CBCC) as it is otherwise known, lasted the duration of the trip. Although the tasks on site were physically challenging, working alongside local tradesman and other volunteers within the community, made us even more determined, not only to finish the project, but to complete it to the high standard we believed they all deserved. As eight volunteers who had never met before, from both Canada and the UK, the project instantly allowed us to bond as a team, improving these skills, which are essential in everyday life. It was an inspiration to see the “no-fuss” attitude of Malawian workers,
many of who were unpaid volunteers and some of which lived in neighbouring communities, walking for two hours every morning to arrive on site for the 7am start in order to help us on the building site. If walking in the dark was not bad enough, the paths by which they had to walk, were by no means flat but riddled with protruding rocks – something that we, as clumsy as we were, learned the hard way!

Development of our communication skills was rapid, especially in the absence of a common language, where learning Chichewa, the local dialect, became an evident necessity in replacement of frantic hand gestures. Soon our greeting of “Muli Bwanji” became a conversation and by the end of the month, we as a team felt we had mastered the basics. Not making it easy for myself, upon attending our first church service within the community, I read a speech in Chichewa to fifty locals, conquering my fear of public speaking - a personal goal prior to the trip.

Alongside working on the building site, we were able to visit previous Joshua projects. Joshua supports five primary school and has helped to build six double primary education blocks, one of which we were able to visit, being fully used, within the neighbouring community, Pensulo. It was amazing to see what we could achieve and the benefits of having such facilities within a community, such as the development of local study groups, choirs and support groups as well as the creation of a successful Youth Group, made up of 40 individuals. This provided the opportunity for local teenagers to meet and play games, discuss ideas and find ways to further assist the community. This was an important aspect of the trip – which we were not simply building and leaving but helping the community help themselves, so that upon leaving, the project could and would continue to grow. Joshua is not only provides education facilities but in 2010, it opened its new maternity, HIV and health centre in Pensulo, serving a wide area and a large population of over 40,000. Expectant mothers who would have had to travel to the local city of Blantyre are now provided with the medical care they need as well as treating common diseases. The clinic also provides support and care for Malawians who suffer from diseases such as malaria, pneumonia and HIV/AIDS, as well as the promotion of family planning. As a student studying Biomedical Sciences, learning of such diseases has been an interesting aspect of my degree. Furthermore, my desire to study Midwifery upon graduating from Queen Mary allowed me to compare and contrast the maternity clinic to the services I have seen being provided through my work experience in the UK. I was able to see first-hand how much compassion contributes to quality of care in Malawi, where adequate equipment and resources that we have in the UK, are absent.

However, it was not all work. At the end of long days on the site, we got to spend some down time playing with the local children and spent weekends staying with local families to be able to fully appreciate and experience the trials and challenges, although not seen that way, that face them every day. During the weeks, we lived within a building that the Chief had allowed us to stay in; using long drops, buckets for showers and sleeping on the hard floor. The food, or lack of, was one of the most challenging parts of the trip but allowed us to appreciate just how lucky we are.
I expected the trip to be a challenge, not only physically in building the feeding centre but also, emotionally – and I was right. Despite the large amount of tears that were shed and the hard goodbyes at the end, the trip allowed me to grow in a number of ways. In addition to bricklaying and cement-mixing abilities, I have gained an appreciation for other cultures and values and developed my non-verbal, verbal and team working skills. I am incredibly grateful to have received the Expeditions Fund, as without it, taking this trip would have been impossible, and the opportunities and experiences I have gained will remain with me throughout the duration of my degree, hopeful Midwifery career and subsequent years.