

## MISSION MALAWI

By Ken and Suzanne Popp

We are back from a stint of building houses with a team of Habitat for Humanity volunteers in Malawi, Southern Africa. We were a small crew, only nine of us, and the villagers must have groaned when they saw a group of gray heads arrive. They didn't express any such disappointment in our age or our numbers, though. The usual team is 12 to 16 members, and tends to be closer to college age. What our team commented on was the number of people living in substandard housing.

Our homeowners, that we were building with and for, were Jennifer, a young mother 20 years old, raising her three siblings and her own child (ages 11, 7, 4, and 3). Jennifer lost her mother last year and her father relocated to another district where he is remarried so the whole responsibility of taking care of her siblings rests in Jennifer's hands. She depends on small scale farming and piece works to survive.

Jennifer and the children slept on a dirt floor in a grass and mud dwelling of about 100 square feet. Her house is not properly roofed and therefore leaks heavily during the rainy season. Part of the wall has also developed cracks. *"Just recently, we received rains in this area. Water just flowed through easily. Our things got wet and the floor was so damp. Often times when it rains, we do not sleep comfortably because we get soaked by the rain,"*

The other homeowner, Rhoda (55) keeps four girls: her own daughter Merlyn (13), her late sister's child – Alena (17) and her late daughter's children - Emeresi (14) and Tiyanjane (10). She lost her daughter 3 years ago while Alena's mother died 16 years ago. To fend for the girls and herself, Rhoda engages in small scale farming, piece works and sometimes sells sugarcane when in season. She also sometimes brews local beer for sale.

Rhoda lost her house during one heavy downpour that occurred in her village so the family is currently staying in a single roomed grass shelter which is prone to heavy leaking. Rhoda explained that when the weather is favorable, she cooks outside but if it is raining, she has no choice but to use the same room for cooking as well. *"If it is raining heavily, we stay hungry because the floor becomes flooded making cooking impossible and our things including ourselves get wet,"* she said.

Further describing her welfare, Rhoda said that ever since her house collapsed, she has been facing a lot of problems and most especially when it is raining. *"The room is small and overcrowded. When it rains heavily, we just stand because the floor becomes very wet due to heavy leaking. I would sometimes use an umbrella while inside the shelter. If it is during the day, I send the children to my relative's house for refuge,"* she said.

The roof leaked, there was no kitchen or bathroom, and no beds or other furniture. We couldn't even see how that many people could be arranged on the floor area. Ten days after we arrived, we had raised two brick homes, substantial, sanitary, and safe. They were made of fired mud brick, 18,000 bricks in the two homes, a brick floor, and double brick walls mortared with simple mud and sand. The exterior would be plastered with a cement compound that would make the walls watertight. The roof was corrugated steel with creosoted eucalyptus saplings lashed together to support it.

There were tears in the eyes of both homeowners as they saw the walls go up each day, and the two little crews working away in the hot sun to make their lives better. No, this was not the most fun or entertaining work, but it was so satisfying to see that at least 10 people who were impoverished and unsafe would now be secure in a home and a village setting. We worked for an audience of dozens of small children, who copied our actions, and made small piles of brick, carried water and cleared the site, doing whatever the supervisors allowed them to do to help. They spent hours playing with the soccer balls we bought, one for each village, and returned the balls to us when we departed each night. For the first time, girls were also given a turn to play soccer.

We did not do the work alone. We had trained builders working with us and directing our efforts to make sure lines were level and plumb, cyanide powder for termites filled the foundation, the rim joists of plastic were inserted, and the doors and windows fit correctly. Every night, the door frames and windows of wood were removed and hidden in the grass hut to make sure they were not stolen. We were shocked the second day when we reached this stage of construction, only to see the windows

and door frames absent the following morning. Besides our trained builders, we had the community behind us. Mostly women did the carrying of water and of brick, men also came to help with the mixing of mortar and endless jobs of heavy lifting. Our oldest team member was 79, and she never spoke of age, just her desire to see the house finished. She had been an auditor with the Corp of Army engineers and she made sure that every row of brick met the standards. At her five feet in height, the foreman and mason towered over her, but she reminded me she had finished the earlier hike to the waterfall well before me, not that she wanted to bring it up, of course.

We had a Pentecostal church in Mulanje and our Presbyterian church in Enumclaw, two churches at least, praying us through this mission. We asked for prayers for health, safety, and unity, as we were building in a remote area where medical help would have taken a couple of hours to reach us. As we worked, we felt a desire to build and get along in community, which carried us through the difficult stretches, such as realizing you have just moved a thousand bricks in the hot sun, and they now all have to be moved again back to where they came from. The phrase that kept me going, in spite of a painful knee condition, was from the Grand Canyon. *First you grumble, then you stumble, then you tumble.* It is a warning to watch your pacing, but for me, the realization was that if I didn't grumble, maybe the other consequences wouldn't follow.

Unity isn't always easy when you have an international team of experts in every field except in what you are doing. We had nurses, attorneys, teachers, IT people, librarians, and auditors. Most of them had done volunteer work before, but all admitted these were some of the poorest families for whom they had built. There was barely a pot to cook in, and the families had no blankets. The children were clothed, but without shoes, underwear, or soap, or any way to repair their clothing. We could see how their lives would change with decent shelter. We were told not to give gifts, as it would cause envy in the village. We did get permission to buy the homeowners reed mats to sleep on, four mats, one for each room in the two houses, at a cost of \$2 each.

One of the daughters of the first homeowner read from a book she had borrowed from her school. She was so proud to be able to hear and pronounce the English words she was learning. She had dreams of going on to school, as did her sisters, all teenagers in primary school. At the house dedication, they sang a song of thanksgiving for the house we had given them, an impossible dream for an orphan-headed household until this new program started.

Malawi has 1.6 million orphans today. A house such as we built costs \$4000 to complete, and the average wage for a person is \$1.00 a day in this part of Malawi, making repayment of even an interest free mortgage an impossibility. These homes built for orphans are fully paid for. To avoid land grabbing, the deed is made out to the youngest member of the selected family, and only upon that child's leaving the home when they are of age, can the property be sold. Giving cadastral rights to women and children is a major innovation in justice and gender equality.

School is free in Malawi, but most students are employed from morning to night hauling water, caring for siblings, or subsistence farming. To attend a government school, students must provide a uniform, wear shoes, and keep their books dry. For girls, the onset of menstruation provides another block, as they cannot afford hygiene products, making regular attendance impossible for them. We left the girls a small supply of napkins, which only cost around \$1 a box and will help one girl for one month. We also provided some school supplies, soap, and underwear, as personal gifts to the homeowners. We left, wishing we could do more, but knowing we had given our all to get those houses completed.

This was our eighteenth build in Africa, and it was one of the most satisfying because our team was filled with purpose, community, and love for the work they were doing and the people who would benefit. We had African Americans, a Ghanaian Canadian, and an attorney born in Russia, who is also an excellent juggler. Three members of the team were in the medical field, one had been a Fulbright scholar in Malawi 25 years previous. There were so many hugs and dances, music and joy. We celebrated Mother Africa once again, everyone saying they would be back, and knowing they would be welcome.