

A Visit to Freedom Compound



It was faster than the internet how word got around that we had arrived in Freedom Compound on the Saturday morning. Not long after Arthur, Netsayi and I had begun to make our way through the meandering, narrow and dusty streets of this community “shantytown”, children we are sponsoring began to pop their heads up around the corners looking in a smiling and curious show of recognition, yet still being overpowered by shyness that spoke to the situation as being completely out of context from our usual meeting

place – their school, Twitti School.



The purpose of our visit was to meet the children at their homes and meet the families with which they live. Our intent was to put a face and name to the people half a world away that are helping their children and grandchildren to attend school and receive a solid education at Twitti Basic School in Lilayi, Zambia. Further, we wanted to reinforce the importance of attending school each and every day and to show that there are people who care: essentially supporters or partners in the education of their children. Simply speaking, our contribution is to provide for the education costs of their children and grandchildren; their contribution is to ensure that their children and grandchildren attend school each day.



Through two different funding initiatives, we have created a means of sponsoring nine different children attending Twitti School, in Lilayi, Zambia. Carolyn and I gathered our 25 families and friends together (we, as the “25 Club”) to ensure that Elizabeth, Evelyn, Fridah, Matilda and Margaret can attend Twitti School.

Through the efforts of my students at École internationale du Village, we raise money each autumn to pay for Regina, Charles, Lois and David to also attend Twitti School. All of the funds are directed toward *Friends for Zambia*, the non-profit charitable organization created in Canada by Patricia



Ellsworth and Shelley O’Callaghan. *The Friends for Zambia* then transfers the entire sum of money to Twitti School to pay for the education, transport, and school uniform costs of the children.

All of these children, with the exception of Matilda, are in Grade 1 at Twitti School. Matilda was retained for another year in Pre-Grade as her skills were not yet adequately developed. She will begin Grade 1 in January 2017, which coincides with the beginning of the new school year. The other eight children will begin Grade 2 in January 2017. To date, all of the nine children have been sponsored through our collective initiatives for two complete school years. The third school year of sponsorship will begin in January and coincide with their new school grades.



Netsayi, the liaison between Twitti School and all of the roughly 40 fully-sponsored children at Twitti School, has the important role of remaining in contact with the families and to ensure that they attend school. She provides that constant link of communication between the children, their families and the school.

Earlier in the week, Netsayi, Arthur and I had told the children that we would come for a visit to their homes on Saturday. However, two of the children misunderstood the instructions and told their moms, unbeknownst to us, that they were to be at the school promptly on Friday morning to meet the head teacher, Mr. Hapaku.

Friday morning arrived and I proceeded to set myself up in the library to begin my day. Upon putting my bag down, I noticed two beautifully-dressed women sitting in the library and appearing to be waiting for someone. I suspected they were waiting for Arthur so I simply greeted them with a smile and the good morning greeting of “Mwa ooka buanji” (phonetic spelling) in Nyanja, the local language in this area of Zambia. They smiled back and exchanged the traditional response of “Bweeno” (again, phonetically written). There was, or would be, no other communication beyond this, or so I thought until a little later.

I proceeded to arrange the reading materials from the leveled reading program that Carolyn and I had recently purchased for Twitti School, with the generous assistance of friends and family, when Arthur rushed in and said the two women waiting in the library were two of the moms of the children we are sponsoring through the 25 Club! They were waiting to see me!



Rushing over, I introduced myself and we proceeded to shake hands. The women explained that they were told to come today. I apologized and said that the girls were supposed to say that we would be coming to their homes on Saturday. The three of us had a good laugh over this miscommunication and then proceeded to talk about the girls and their important lives at school.

To say that Esther (Evelyn’s mom) and Beauty

(Elizabeth's mom) were grateful for our assistance helping the girls to attend school is an enormous



understatement. I don't think I have ever witnessed such profound gratefulness in two women for the assistance we are providing for their girls. They showed such gratitude in both their words and their facial expressions. I simply replied that it was an absolute pleasure to help these children and that there were many, many families back in Canada helping and wishing for the best for their children.

I shared a few stories about my family back home and shared a video message from Carolyn, Madeline and Gabrielle that I had recorded back in Canada for our friends Arthur and his mom, Lydia Maonde, just prior to my departure for Zambia. They loved it and wanted to record a message for Carolyn and the girls. We spent the next few minutes recording a short video for Carolyn and the girls, and then parted ways agreeing to meet again on Saturday at their home.

Back in Freedom Compound on the Saturday morning, as we began to wind our way through the streets, we first arrived in the area of where Evelyn and her siblings live with their mom, Esther.



The community on this Saturday morning was teeming with activity. The housing in Freedom Compound is comprised mainly of very small brick shelters. Some shelters are connected; others are separated either by small passageways, by streets, or by tall vertical dried-grass fence enclosures. Arthur explained that the community is always evolving and changing in that the structures are constructed on a first-come first-served squatter basis, settling on any available space.



Arthur explained to me that, within this community, there was no running water. Years ago, a Japanese company drilled a bore hole (well) that provides a source of water for the community. The water is only available between 12 noon and 2pm each day. During this time, families must bring any containers available to collect water from the bore hole to serve their needs for the rest of the day. Toilet facilities are communal, small brick structures, randomly and sparsely located – essentially outhouses made of brick. Once the toilet is full of human waste, the holes are then covered over and the toilet is relocated elsewhere. The problem, Arthur explained, is that once this space becomes available, someone eventually decides to build their home on this location. Therefore, the threat of disease is always present in these circumstances, especially during the rainy season

when human waste mixes with the run-off from the rains.



The homes that I entered were extremely modest and no larger than the average bedroom in Canada. Esther kept her living quarters and shaded porch very neat and tidy. Esther and I warmly greeted each other and I gave Evelyn a big hug. Again, Esther repeated her gratitude. I simply reiterated that it was a pleasure to help and we felt so strongly about Evelyn attending school each day so that she could develop into a confident and well-educated young woman.

Just before we parted, Esther asked me to pass on a greeting to my family (Carolyn, Madeline and Gabrielle) and all of the big-hearted people back in Canada who were supporting her daughter to provide the opportunity for a brighter future. After this request, she then proceeded to give me a sarong that I must bring back as a gift from her to Carolyn.



As we were leaving Evelyn's house, I was introduced to a woman by the name of Brenda who was the big sister of Lois, one of the children we are sponsoring through my school. Lois and her mother could not be there as they had recently moved to another community settlement nearby. I presented Brenda with the sport shirt from my school that I had shown to Lois earlier in the week. We bid farewell, shook hands again, promised to keep in touch and then went on our way, looking for our next

sponsored child.

Shortly after, we meandered our way to another home and found Regina sitting outside her home on what appeared to be a large piece of PVC pipe repurposed as a resting place. Beside her stood a beautifully-dressed woman who happened to be her mother. We spoke briefly about Regina and her time at school. I also mentioned that she was involved in our new reading program that we have introduced at Twitti School. I then told her about all of the children at my school that are supporting her and wanting her to attend school each day. After taking a couple of photos I presented her with her new sport shirt from my school that I had packed in my bulging suitcases. Again, I explained that there were over 700 children at my school supporting her and wishing her the best.





We then continued on our way, street to street, almost like in a living labyrinth of children playing in the streets, people coming and going, small roaming herds of goats, small flocks of chickens, small markets selling tomatoes, dried minnows, deep-fried small corn-based 'donuts' called medanzis, in Swahili (that Carolyn, I and the girls could not eat enough of in Tanzania), dried grasshoppers and dried caterpillars, rat meat, and small containers of cooking oil sold by the kwacha or two (1 kwacha equals 20

cents), the occasional blare of loud music, and the ever-present pungent smell of so many people living together in such a small space. Almost everywhere you looked was the ever present "Talk-time" available for purchase: scratch coupons that are purchased to put airtime on your cell phone.

Arthur explained that the average wage for residents in Freedom Compound is roughly 2 or 3 dollars (10 or 15 kwachas) per day. For this reason, all of the items in the market are sold in units of 1 or 2 kwachas (5 kwachas equals one Canadian dollar). This way, a woman can buy a little cooking oil, some tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, rice, charcoal for cooking, onions, and prepare a meal for her family. Other items such as a 40 pound bag of



mealy meal to make nshima (the ever-present food in their diet), are purchased on a larger scale when money becomes available.



Passing one of the larger markets, Arthur smiled at me and asked if I wanted to try a "Fear Factor" and to try the caterpillars or the rat meat. I declined but did agree to try the dried grasshoppers. They were not my favourite snack I have ever eaten, but they were at least crunchy.



On our way to find Margaret and Fridah, two girls we sponsor through the 25 Club, we found David, one of the sponsored children through my school, standing against a brick wall, all alone and quiet. I greeted him warmly and was told that his family was not around. I asked him why he had not been at school. I was prepared for discussing this as he had already missed two days of school since I arrived at Twitti School only one week ago. I wanted to speak with his mom about the importance of him attending school each and every day and that there were 700 kids back at my school supporting him and wanting him to get a good education. I was told that his mom was not around and no one was really taking care of him.

At this point, all of my 'talking points' simply evaporated in my head and I realized that sometimes there are obstacles greater than I can imagine for why a child, even at seven or eight years of age, cannot go to school.

In parting, I handed him the soccer jersey that I had been saving for him and that he had personally selected, gave him a hug and told him I hoped to see him at school on Monday.

As we were about to say goodbye to David, two beaming smiles



from Margaret and Fridah suddenly appeared. These two wonderful and beautiful young sisters have smiles as

wide as the ocean and as warm as the sun. The two girls love learning and reading and their zest for life is contagious. Standing beside them was their mom and a host of other children, curious about our encounter. There were so many children, it was impossible for me to discern between siblings, relatives or simply curious onlookers. I was able to again explain how these girls were supported by 25 families back in Canada, how they were involved in the new reading program and that their attendance at school was important for their success.

After a few photos, we bid farewell and left, with Margaret and Fridah trailing behind us, now and then popping their

heads around the corner to watch us as we wined our way through the community.

Next, was our visit with Charles, the other boy sponsored through my school. Charles is a small waif of a child. If I had not met and worked with him several times already back at Twitti School, I would think that he lacked the ability to speak. When we approached him, he was incredibly shy and reserved. Again, I think the entire experience was completely out of context for him. Even though he knew that Netsayi, Arthur and I were coming, he still was lost for words.

Charles lives with his grandmother, and at least one younger brother, in a brick-walled shelter that was probably at most 120



square feet. We were warmly invited into their home. Arthur and I spoke with his grandmother about Charles and the new reading program in which he was participating at Twitti School. She was very happy and appreciative for our efforts to provide for Charles to attend school.

As we sat in their small and humble home, I showed his grandmother a short video I had taken back at my school in anticipation of my trip. Right at the beginning of the school year, only two weeks ago, my school principal, Chantal, gave me four school sports shirts with our school logo and name emblazoned on the front. These were to be gifts for Charles, David, Regina, and Lois. To prepare the students at my



school for the annual fund-raising efforts, I tacked the shirts on the bulletin board with photos of each of the faces of the four sponsored children as if they were wearing the shirts.

A few days prior to my departure, I recorded four of my students (Anna, Mia, Pauline and Celeste) giving a greeting to Regina, Lois, David and Charles, in front of the pictures of these four Twitti School students. During this simple, two-minute video, my four students enthusiastically

said hello to their four friends at Twitti School, one by one, and wished them well and told them all about the importance of going to school. At this moment, I realized any comment I could make would be redundant. This short and simple message from four-11 year old girls, half a world away, spoke to the importance of Charles attending school and that he is cared for and supported in his education life. We promised to continue supporting Charles and then bid farewell.

As we went on our way to search for Matilda and Elizabeth, I kept seeing Margaret peeking out from behind tall grass fences and anything else she could partially hide behind, curious about our journey and wishing to come closer and walk near us.

Next, we found Elizabeth's home. To my surprise, she did not appear to live with her mom, Beauty. Instead I met her grandmother and great-grandmother. Elizabeth's grandmother is a woman who has a welcoming presence in her gestures, in her words as well as the look on her kind face. She warmly welcomed us into a shady area and cleared off a grass mat for us to sit on.

Elizabeth is a young girl who looks into your eyes and you feel she is kind of peering into your soul. This is a child that seems to express herself through her eyes, rather than her words.



My first encounter with Elizabeth was to assess her reading levels for the new reading program. I asked her teacher for Elizabeth, Margaret, Fridah and Evelyn to follow me to the library to begin the reading program. I could tell that they were initially shy and that they had no idea as to who I was.

Upon getting to the library, the girls stopped at the entrance of the building to take their shoes off, as all of the children were expected to do, or so I thought. Arthur saw this and explained to me that it was only during the rainy season that the children are required to remove their shoes prior to entering the library in order to avoid the ever-present red clay mud from being tracked throughout the building.

One could say that it was habit in removing their shoes. Personally, I got the feeling that it was due to respect for the school. As soon as they removed their shoes, I noticed that they were missing something: socks. None of the four girls were wearing socks!

Once the five of us sat down at a round table in the library, I introduced myself. At the sound of my name, Elizabeth's eyes went wide and she repeated my name as if she did not hear correctly. She immediately made the connection between me and her attendance at Twitti School. I asked her if she knew who I was. She immediately began nodding her head and said I was "Uncle Steve from Canada". The other three girls also nodded their heads in agreement. As hard as I tried, I could not stop the tears from welling up in my eyes.

I told them all about the many, many families that were supporting them back in Canada and that I had a backpack and socks for each of them, given as a gift from our friend, Meg. They began jumping up and down and told me they did not have a backpack. To avoid pandemonium and the loss of concentration, I showed them the backpacks and said that they would get them in a few days.



For four young girls with very little personal possessions, they were incredibly polite and willing to wait for another day to receive their gifts!

Back in Freedom Compound, on the Saturday morning, Netsayi, Arthur, Elizabeth, her grandmother - along with a small grandchild in her lap, and I, sat together under the shade to cool off from the hot and sunny 34 degree temperatures. Again, the gratitude from Elizabeth's grandmother was enormous and genuine. I showed them the video of Carolyn and the girls back in Canada and we had a good laugh about the blooper video that I made when I was filming Madeline and Gabrielle back home prior to my departure.

When we were filming the night before I left for Zambia, both Madeline and Gabrielle had not realized I was actually beginning to film. They both simply sat motionless and speechless, looking at the iPad, for about 10 seconds thinking that I was going to tell them when I would begin filming. The upshot was that the blooper was a huge hit with Elizabeth and her grandmother and we all shared the humour of the situation and the shared love for family.

We finally parted ways after shaking hands several times with Elizabeth's grandmother and great grandmother.



Our final route took us to find Matilda, the fifth girl sponsored by us in the 25 Club. Behind a tall grass fence, we found her with four or five children, and she was still wearing the soccer jersey I gave to her two days prior at Twitti School.

The soccer jerseys were a little bit of a last minute idea on my part prior to leaving for Zambia. I decided to get my colleague, Isabel, to post a message on the school's Facebook page

that any families from our school community wishing to donate a soccer jersey to the kids at Twitti School could do so and would be gratefully welcomed and appreciated. Upon the start of school, I also passed the word on to my students. Within two or three days, I had over 60 soccer jerseys! With the help of Madeline back home, I was able to add, jersey by jersey, enough to reach exactly the 50 pound maximum per suitcase. In total, I brought over 40 soccer jerseys (not to mention the 5 pairs of soccer shorts from our dear friend Heidi) for the kids at Twitti School. A last-minute addition brought Wynn's (Ross and Alex's son) soccer jersey along for the ride.

We spoke with Matilda and asked about her mom. An older boy mentioned that Matilda's mom was not home as she was attending a funeral - a much too common occurrence in Zambia and many other countries in Africa. We spent a few minutes with Matilda and her siblings and then departed promising to read some more together at school in the coming week.



Although Matilda was retained in Pre-Grade (kindergarten), I made the decision to include her in the new reading program for the Grade 1 students. I wanted her to develop the early reading skills as soon as possible to keep up with the other four girls we are sponsoring in the 25 Club and to see if she can

improve enough, over the coming four or five months, so that she may be able to catch up with her peers in reading level.

With our visits complete, we bid farewell to Netsayi. Arthur and I then made our way back through the meandering and chaotic, but teeming with life and activity, streets of Freedom Compound to get a mini bus (dalla dalla) ride back to his house. Squished into a small minibus with 16 other people along with an enormous bag of dried-fish covered with flies, I felt exhilarated by my visits with these warm and appreciative families. It reconfirmed to me that these efforts to sponsor their education will help to change the lives of these children.

Once we exited the minibus, we had only one task left to do before getting back to Arthur's house. We needed to track down, Enala, a Grade 8 student at Twitti School. Enala and her twin sister, Loveness, are both sponsored by families back in Canada. When Enala's sponsor, Sarah, was informed that I would be visiting Twitti School in early September, she requested that I pass along \$20 USD to Enala so that she could buy some running shoes.

Back at Twitti School a few days earlier, I had spoken with Enala and told her that I would be coming by on the weekend to give her the money that Sarah had given to her.

After about 20 minutes of walking on the hot asphalt of the Lilayi Road, searching and asking people for directions to the twins' home, we finally located her mom sitting outside. Arthur introduced us and said that we had a gift from Sarah, Enala's sponsor, so that she could participate in sports days at Twitti School. Again, the appreciation was evident in both her words and facial expressions. She immediately remembered Sarah's name and she asked the girls to go inside their home and bring out a couple of family photos that Sarah had sent.



Sitting on old and dented plastic fuel containers for chairs, we sat under a mango tree and talked about education and the importance of them attending school. Enala's mom is raising 8 children: seven of the children are hers and the eighth child is from her sister who had passed away. She would like to work again or even to go back to school. But with so many children to care for, it is impossible for her.

We finally parted ways after sharing laughter and watching the videos of Carolyn and the girls as a gesture of sharing our family lives.

We finally made our way back to Arthur's house and talked about the day. I told him how overwhelmed I was by the genuine gratitude expressed by the mothers and grandmothers that we met. I also mentioned how good it felt to be able to help make this direct change, with the help of my own family,

our dear friends and my school community back home, in the lives of these nine children at Twitti School.



Arthur, ever the thoughtful and insightful person that he is, corrected me and said that we are not simply changing the lives of these children: Elizabeth, Evelyn, Fridah, Margaret and Matilda with the help of our kind-hearted friends and family in the 25 Club; Charles, David, Lois and Regina, through the efforts of my students back in Canada. We are *also* changing the lives of their mothers, their grandmothers *and* their local community of Freedom Compound. We are creating a sense of hope in

these women who simply want the best for their children and grandchildren. In our collective effort, we are creating a small, yet powerful and empowered community of children, mothers and grandmothers, who can feel hope *and* look toward a brighter future through the gift of education.

Steve

