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To Zambia, with love from Maine

BY LEIGH MACMILLEN HAYES

What began as a Habitat for Humanity project in the village of Kaoma (Kah-oh-ma), located in Zambia, Africa, turned into an empowerment program for women and children with the help of some Mainers.

Lynn Twitchell and Cindy Fuchswanz of Maine, along with Amanda Robinson of North Carolina, were part of that building project in 2001. They quickly recognized the profound poverty in this area of the Western Province hard hit by HIV/AIDS and wanted to help beyond the initial cause. The three returned to the States with a goal of helping African women become self-supporting by giving them hope.

The first step in this new journey was to provide a sewing machine to Margaret Mundia, a woman they realized was a talented tailor and leader. As the mother of eight, she had experienced abandonment

and felt the need to care for her own children, but also teach others how to sew so that they could clothe their families and earn money. More sewing machines were provided and it soon became evident that a women's center was needed.

In 2004, Margaret and another woman formed what was initially called Lynn's Women's Empowerment Center, but has since been renamed Kaoma WISE Trust. That inspired the U.S. group to start a non-profit named WISE (Women's Initiatives that Strengthen and Empower) based in Maine, with Lynn as president and Cindy as Vice President one year later.

The two groups work together to help improve lives and communities. The women's center was located in a work space visible to the entire community and funded



by baskets and fabric items they made and sold, plus support from U.S. WISE donors. They received all types of training, including agricultural skills to help improve their food security both at home and within the greater community.

Though Lynn and Cindy have stepped down from organizational duties, there is still a woman from Lewiston/Auburn who was so moved after learning about the work in Africa during a talk by them in 2010, that she knew she wanted to get involved. In 2013 Joanne Bollinger, aka Jo-Jo, made her first trip.

She went to Zambia with the intention of it being a one-time visit and then contributing to the cause. Instead, she returned each year and joined the board in 2015, as the board and Zambian staff refocused its mission. Currently, Jo-Jo serves as Interim Board Chair and Secretary.

"It didn't take me long to get involved once I met these people who have so little,



but a great sense of joy about life,” she said. “These women are welcoming and friendly. Zambians are proud to be known as friendly people. They have great passion for their families and especially children. While visiting, they’d say, ‘Let me show you my house,’ or ‘Come and eat.’ Going to church services touches your soul. The joy in their music is amazing.”

With the new board structure, the program has grown. They’ve hired an executive director to oversee policies and programs in Zambia and that person just happens to be Margaret’s daughter, Maggie Indopu. Education became the impetus because a tremendous number of girls do not have opportunities to attend school beyond grade 7. Instead, marriage and pregnancy have been the traditional alternatives.

Maggie said, “WISE is on a mission to empower and create economic independence for vulnerable women and children within the province of Zambia.”

“Initially there was great resistance among families to have their girls go to school,” said Jo-Jo. “Many live in remote villages with no clean water. Their latrines are often holes in the ground. When the children attend school, they must either walk an hour or two to get there or board with another family in town. Then it is a huge culture shock for 8th and 9th graders to go into a large boarding school situation.”

The first year they helped 28 students with tuition and the purchase of things like uniforms, shoes, toiletries and school supplies, all items they cannot afford, but are required at the government-run schools. Now, over 500 students, girls and boys, are enrolled in 8th-12th grade and another 62 receive scholarships for college, nursing or vocational school. Mr. Mukela, the education coordinator, and an administrative assistant keep track of all of the kids, their grades, and their family status as the students are enrolled in schools across three districts in the province.

Sister Mate, head of Presentation Secondary School said, “Girls are given an opportunity to explore what they want to do in life. Education is an equalizer and it gives the girls a forum to compete with a boy-child. Girls are not just made for the kitchen. Parents learn that the girl-child can do what the boys can do and even do it better than the boy-child.”

“For us to develop as a nation,” said Maggie, “education has to be accessed by every child.”

She requires that all students sign a contract that they will volunteer while in high school as a way of giving back. And for those in college, they must sign a contract stating that after one year of employment they will commit 6% of their salary for seven years to help others in the program. When Jo-Jo interviewed a number of the college graduates, they said they felt it was important to give back because of the huge support WISE had provided to them and their families.

“One of the challenges,” said Jo-Jo, “is that there is sometimes a stigma about going to trade school. A young deaf woman was the first to attend for carpentry. She already has a bank account and plans to open her own shop.”

Security is a real issue in Kaoma because in a place where poverty is so prevalent, things like computers, quickly disappear. This is where the story gets even more interesting.

In 2019, some time after Jo-Jo had finished recording a radio podcast, she received an email via her WISE Zambia address that began, “I’m writing this with a sense of apprehension, but it might answer some questions.”

It turns out, the email was from a son she’d long ago given up for adoption. James had had a wonderful life, but after hearing the podcast, that cemented his intention to reach out. The relationship has proven not only to bring joy to Jo-Jo and her other two children, plus she gained two grandchildren, but also James works for HDR, Inc., a company with a foundation that gives grants to non-profit proj-

ects employees recommend. Initially, with James’s endorsement they provided a majority of the security fence around the WISE campus; Lewiston-Auburn Rotary funded the first small portion. Now, a non-profit team out of HDR, known as Design for Others (D4O), has started designing Phase 2 of WISE’s Learning Center, a campus of modern classroom buildings featuring enhanced learning environments and dorms. James serves as the liaison between D4O, staff in Zambia and the U.S., and HDR. And he’s looking forward to a trip to Zambia.

Meanwhile, Phase 1 is the current Buy a Brick campaign which will fund a traditional style school building in Zambia, but includes a computer lab, the area’s first library, and a science lab/classroom.

“Education helps transform lives,” said Maggie. And we can all be a part of that transformation by contributing to their capital campaign for Phase 1 of the Learning Center. It will take 7,000 building blocks to complete the building. Think of it this way: \$5 = 1 block; \$20 = a window sill; \$50 = a door frame; \$1,000 = an entire wall. Consider buying a brick to help WISE Zambia grow with love from Maine. 🌸

FMI: wisezambia.org
Buy a Brick: wisezambia.harnessgiving.org/campaigns/9413

