

A world apart

By Jim Zeeben
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There is nothing about life in B.C. that jolts Khama Chibwana out of his current sabbatical in Canada and forces his thoughts to go back to the remote African village he's left behind. Nothing could because his thoughts never stray from the people of Zomba, Malawi, sister city of Saanich since 1988.

"I can't think of a time when my thoughts don't go back to Zomba," said Chibwana, an instructor at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College in Zomba. "It's quite difficult to put into words what life is like out there, the difference is so huge. Most people I've talked to in Canada have no idea." Chibwana has been in Canada since January 2005 on a scholarship to study for his master's in Child and Youth Care. He took time from his studies to attend a luncheon held by the Saanich Employees Centennial Project on Wednesday.

A slide show depicted some of the living conditions in Zomba and showed how support has already helped improve life.

"The help that is being given by Saanich is going a long way to improving the life of those kids," Chibwana told the several dozen people who attended the luncheon. One slide showed a group of brightly dressed school kids lining up for lunch provided by the school. For most of the kids it was the first meal they had eaten that day. "When there's food you can really see the excitement in the centre," said Chibwana. "The issues we are dealing with (in terms of Early Childhood Education) are not theoretical – they're practical."



Jim Zeeben/Saanich News

Khama Chibwana might physically be in Saanich but his thoughts are always with the school he teaches at in Zomba, Malawi.

Saanich News Article – January 27, 2006

Another image showed children playing near four-foot-tall rows of corn, grown from seeds sent by Saanich delegates on their last trip to Zomba.

One person who has made the long journey is Mike Ippen, Saanich's public works manager.

"When I came back the first time it was a very difficult readjustment," said Ippen.

"We have so much and we've had it for so long we don't even realize it's here. The difference (between Zomba and Saanich) is just the scale of how wealthy we really are."

This year, as part of the centennial, municipal employees in Saanich are raising \$25,000 to build a community centre for preschool-aged kids in Zomba. The facility will provide a new generation of children with a safer start to life.

"The need is like Niagara Falls and— even as substantial as this project is— it's kind of like a garden hose (in the face of what's needed)," said a pragmatic Ippen, recalling his time visiting municipal employees in Zomba. The office culture of the former British colony seemed like 1950s North America, with workers dressed in three-piece suits. Ippen said it was amazing to see well-dressed men emerge from homes with no access to running water.

Some of the huts were made with bricks that would literally melt in the rain.

The chair of the Saanich Employees Centennial Project, Pam Hartling, said it's important to expand on the relationship the municipality has had with its African sister city.

"It's certainly a part of the world that needs help and we wanted to keep our connection with part of the world," she said, noting that the area around Zomba has been devastated by HIV/AIDS and is currently suffering through a famine.

For Chibwana, the reality of life in Africa is one he'll never escape despite some of the excesses he's seen in Canada.

"It's amazing how much toys you can fit in a Canadian home," he said, flashing a smile. "Canada is blessed with a lot of everything."

Africa, on the other hand, is something else.

"Life is very difficult," he said, noting that 48 per cent of children under five are malnourished. "Poverty is the big problem. At the end of the day, you're talking about a lack of resources."

Chibwana finishes his studies in Canada this April and doesn't think he'll ever be back— there's simply too much to do back home. He will, however, bring with him memories of his time here, and how different life is in this country.

"On the 1st of July, I was in Vancouver on Canada Day," recalled Chibwana, trying once more to explain how alien our lifestyle can seem. "There was a street party and two people were throwing eggs to see how far they could throw them without breaking them. It occurred to me I've never seen eggs being thrown— that's food, protein."

Precious stuff that we're privileged enough to take for granted.

For more information about Saanich's Zomba Kidz project, call 475-5477 or visit the municipality's website at www.saanich.ca.