

Making a difference in Malawi

Saanich launches a centennial project to raise funds for a village daycare in one of the poorest nations in the world

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Khama Chibwana has seen a lot in his life. He has seen poverty and hunger tear through his homeland of Malawi, in East Africa. He has seen children near starvation during the country's severe drought. He has seen the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS. And, more recently, as the 31-year-old began studying child and youth care at the University of Victoria, he has seen first-hand the country of Canada -- wealthy and prosperous.

Canada, he says, "is a land that's got plenty of everything." Including, he is finding, generosity.

Chibwana was the guest speaker in Saanich last week when the municipality announced a \$25,000 fundraising project to build a community daycare in the village of Magalasi, in southern Malawi.

The daycare would give as many as 200 local children, many of whom were orphaned after their parents died of AIDS, a preschool in which to learn, play and receive basic nutritional care. The money, distributed in partnership with Malawi's Chancellor College, would hire teacher helpers and support local sustainable agriculture projects in one of the world's poorest countries.

The village is near Chibwana's hometown of Zomba, and he narrated a slideshow presentation that showed buildings with broken thatch roofs full of holes, sheltering large groups of young Malawi children. The images were in sharp contrast to the dim, comfortable surroundings of the Saanich council chambers where politicians and municipal workers gathered to unveil the fundraising effort they call the Zomba Kidz Project.

Chibwana has been studying in UVic's child and youth care masters degree program since last January when he came to the country on a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship. He described a return visit to Magalasi in September where he asked a group of children, at 11 a.m., if any of them had eaten breakfast.

"Just a few of those kids had actually eaten that morning," he said.

Malawi is one of the world's poorest nations, and relies heavily on international economic assistance. It struggled with a drought last year that hurt its mainly agricultural-based economy, but recently the rain began to fall. Now parts of the country are reportedly flooding.



CREDIT: John McKay, Times Colonist
Malawi native Khama Chibwana, who is studying child and youth care at UVic, knows firsthand the poverty and desperation that plagues his homeland. The Zomba Kidz Project aims to improve basic care for up to 200 pre-school children.

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HIV/AIDS is spreading in Malawi, as it is in much of Africa. The country, nestled between Tanzania in the north and Mozambique in the south, has the 13th highest death rate in the world, the 10th lowest life expectancy at birth, and the eighth highest HIV/AIDS rate.

An estimated 14 per cent of adults have HIV/AIDS and it killed as many as 84,000 people in 2003. Many of the dead are parents, leaving behind what has become known as AIDS orphans, who are often cared for by elderly grandparents or other relatives.

The District of Saanich had partnered with Zomba as a sister-city in the 1980s until 2001. Saanich once sent a group of staff over to help train Malawians and repair their wells. Saanich wants to renew that relationship to celebrate its centennial year.

"We're a community that has so much, we're so fortunate and we thought it was a good idea to do something for a community less fortunate than ours," said Pam Hartling, chairwoman of the Saanich Employees Centennial Committee.

Some of the \$25,000 is expected to be raised through donations from Saanich's 1,460 municipal employees, which include police and fire officials. The municipality is hoping to reach its target goal in the next three to four months, and is appealing for public donations to the Zomba Kidz project through its website: www.gov.saanich.bc.ca

Hartling said Saanich has already made a difference in Malawi. In December, as stories of starvation and drought made the news, Saanich held a Christmas bake sale where it made \$2,300, she said. The money was used to plant 2.5 acres of edible maize crop in Magalasi, which has since grown to 1.2-metres tall and provides much-needed food for the community, said Hartling.

Chibwana, who returns to Malawi in April for research, said the outpouring of support from Saanich fits well with Canada's international reputation of being a generous country.

"The help that is being given by Saanich is going a long way to improving the life of those kids," said Chibwana. "I think it's going to make a huge difference."

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