

Lalmba Letters

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news from and about Africa

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HUGH'S NEWS

NOW, HERE'S A DIFFICULT QUESTION FOR YOU

by Hugh Downey, founder



WHICH OF THESE CHILDREN HAS AIDS ?

ANSWER . . . "all of them"

All of these children have AIDS. They are all being cared for at our Matoso Medical Center in Kenya where they receive painstakingly prepared anti retroviral drugs. There is little doubt that all of these boys and girls would have died some time ago without the medicines provided by Lalmba. Treating children with AIDS is much more difficult than treating adults. Each dose of medication must be precisely prescribed for their weight – and as children's weight changes as they grow, the dosage must be constantly evaluated.

Not only do these kids receive their medical care, but they are also in a program called "Reaching Children at Risk". In addition to medical care, this program provides food, clothing, education expenses and other necessities – like blankets, for more than 1,500 AIDS orphans.

God Bless You for being an important part of this incredible program. This is what we are 'all about' and we realize that without your continued support, projects like this could not be possible.

OUR HOUSE IS GOING TO THE BIRDS

by Hugh Downey, founder

You've seen photos of our house in Africa. It's a grass hut under an old acacia tree. The African name for it is a tukal. We love the place for its simplicity and thatch roof. The grass roof keeps it cool on hot days and when the rain comes, it sheds the water nearly as good as a metal roof. We awake every morning to the sound of birds announcing the start of a new day.



There are a few drawbacks however. Once we had a green mamba (a very poisonous snake!) inside. There's always an interesting selection of insects in the grass on the roof. Then there are the lizards. Inside are geckos which devour the little bugs and outside are skinks which eat anything which tries to get away from the geckos.

Last month when the annual rains began, the initial deluge of heavy rains made the thatch leak. That's not entirely unexpected. The initial rains often drip and leak until the grass swells, creating a moisture barrier which is really impressive.

But now we have a new roofing issue to deal with.

IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE, NO . . . IT'S A BIRD

For more than 15 years, two African Fish Eagles have also taken up residence near our tukal. They roost in a large tree overhead. We affectionately call them Bert and Ernie. What a splendid pair they are – and always entertaining to watch.

Well, just a few weeks ago Marty and I found them – how can I say – playing naughty games in the eucalyptus tree. We discovered that Bert and Ernie are actually Beatrice and Ernie. And shortly after that they started building a nest in a nearby tree. Therein



African Fish Eagles above our house. These birds are huge and very similar in appearance to the American Bald Eagle.

lies the newest problem. The two lovebirds are pulling the grass off of our roof for their nest. Now we have a BIG leak.

Hey . . . living in Africa is always full of surprises.

Did I ever tell you about the Nile Monitor Lizard that lives under the house next door? Now, there's a story . . . for the next issue.

NOW, LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO . . .

This is Marty at our nutrition education program at our Ochuna Dispensary. The twins are malnourished and are ready for their specially prepared meal.



*The twins are named: **George and Washington!***

Carrole's Corner

I visited our programs in Africa recently. While traveling, I heard about the natural disasters in the world - floods, earthquakes, tornadoes. Thousands of people's lives were taken or thrown into complete upheaval in minutes. It puts our everyday problems into perspective. It reminds us what is truly important.

Catastrophic disasters make the news because they're so remarkable. But regular life can be just as difficult. Many Americans are struggling to put food on their tables. Some no longer have a place to live. Others fight a hard battle with illnesses our modern medicine can't yet cure. For each of these people, life seems like a "daily disaster."

Even so, in America we have access to help others in the world would marvel at. Clean water. Homeless shelters. Food pantries. Children's services. Insurance and disaster funds.

Kenya is just coming out of a severe drought, the worst in 50 years. Our area was hit hard. Crops and livestock dying at every turn. Wells and streams dried up for months. People weren't desperate for clean water. They were desperate for any water. Walking 4-5 hours - each way - to get water from Lake Victoria. Dirty water. Carrying it on their backs.

When I arrived at in Kenya the rains had finally begun. The local people were frantically planting their crops - more than a month late. Their oxen had either died or were too weak to pull a plow, so they plowed by hand or just planted without even plowing. Every morning the talk was about whether it would continue to rain enough to have a harvest. The raw anxiety was palpable. If they don't have a decent harvest, what will they eat? Even animals seemed desperate. Cows and sheep feeding on the new grass looked like a video on fast forward - eating at a frantic, frenetic pace. It was almost comical... if it hadn't been so serious.

In the midst of such crises, Lalmba brings help. Lalmba's Relief program provides food basics to dozens of elderly people and at-risk children every

Perspectives

by Carrole Johnson, executive director



Lalmba provides food for these children. Their mother died and their father is incapacitated by AIDS.

month. Unemployment is so high in Kenya that those who work typically support 20 other family members. Some people have no one to support them. Except Lalmba.

I visited six of our Relief program families. A young widow and infant living in an 8'x8' mud shack. A frail elderly man caring for his four small grandchildren in a shack not much larger. The tiny garden out front couldn't grow a week's food. The older school-age children are in our RCAR program, but Lalmba helps feed the whole family.

It's very humbling to walk amidst the people we serve, knowing with certainty that there will be food on my table today and tomorrow. That if my house were destroyed by weather, I'd have a place to stay. That when I turn on a faucet, clean water will come out - something these folks will never have, even when the drought is over. I have every reason to be joyful and thankful, all of the time.

The perspective adjustment we get when hearing about an earthquake in Japan is a gift in the midst of tragedy. These Africans I love - these people I go to "help" - are slowly teaching me to appreciate the many, many blessings in my life. And so sometimes I wonder:

Who exactly is blessing whom?

Mistaken Identity - Ethiopian Style

by Annie Grossman-Wachter, MPH; Public Health Director, Ethiopia

Annie and her husband, Daniel Wachter, M.D., are volunteers at Lalmba's Chiri Health Center in Ethiopia. Daniel serves as Medical Director.

A few weeks ago Daniel called me into his office to see a patient who had come to the clinic complaining of shortness of breath. Sitting on the bench was a middle-aged woman with a huge tumor growing out of her neck. It was pressing on her throat, thus making it almost impossible to breathe. While there are many people who come to our health center with enormous goiters from lacking iodine this one was different. Daniel drained it and was fairly confident that it was cancer and if not removed soon, probably going to kill her.

When patients need care that is beyond what we can provide they either go to Bonga, about 45 minutes away, or the larger city, Jimma, four hours away. Daniel knew she would need more serious help and therefore brought her to see the health center director who would help her figure out the next steps to get her to the hospital in Jimma. We advised her to return to her town and request a "free letter" (when people are very poor the village chairman can write them a "free letter" which attests to their need to have treatment given at no cost), gather some money for her journey and to come with us to Jimma the following week. We weren't exactly sure what date the car would be leaving so we collected her contact information and said we would be in touch once we knew for certain.

A few days later I was in her village on outreach and sent her a note letting her know that a car from Lalmba would be going to Jimma in four days. (Keep in mind that I am using my very limited Kafañono and hand gestures to explain who I was looking for). As I have written about in other posts, proper communication here is painfully lacking...with no home phones, cell phones, mail, home addresses or internet we often have to rely on letters passed on from one person to the next in order to communicate. As I have seen in other situations and again here- it doesn't always work so well.

Three days later a woman did in fact arrive in Chiri with a large neck tumor and eager to see what the doctors in Jimma could do for her.



Annie with Baruk, one of the orphans in our Children's Home

Unfortunately, she was not the same woman! Our note must have been given to the wrong person... The lady did have a huge goiter for over 15 years and while we don't typically take goiter patients to Jimma (its not life threatening) it seemed like it was the right thing to do considering the circumstances. Ironically, she didn't have a free letter and so would have to return home and come back with one for our next Jimma run. So thus, we went to Jimma without any woman or any neck tumors.

Luckily, the real patient returned a week later, still breathing and ready to go to Jimma.

Free letter: check. Family member to escort her: check. Correct tumor: check. Ahhh, the pleasure of working in the developing world.



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