

A visit to The Kawambwa Schools in Zambia





Inverness County Cares (ICC), is a local charitable society which was formed in 2012 with the goal of providing for underprivileged children in the Third World. Our membership consists of 9 board members, approximately 10 more regular members and many people in our communities who volunteer their time when needed. Together with our partner Chalice (www.chalice.ca) we help provide food, water, shelter and education to the students at the Kawambwa group of two schools, which are situated in the Northern part of Zambia. The first school, Saint Mary's, which is located in Kawambwa, was opened in 1961 by Dutch sisters and partnered with Chalice in 1997. The second school Saint Odilia, is located in Mporokoso, 200 km North from the Saint Mary's school. This school opened in 1962 and partnered with Chalice in 2012. These schools cater to a large number of children who are born with Albinism. In addition to this, many of the children have physical handicaps, HIV positive status, hearing disabilities, epilepsy, hydrocephalus and high rates of visual impairment.



Albinism is a genetic condition that results in the absence of melanin, a pigment that is responsible for giving color to the eyes, skin and hair. This lack of melanin means that people living with albinism are more susceptible to specific health conditions. According to the Albino Foundation of Zambia, a great challenge facing more than 25,000 Zambians with albinism is over-exposure to sunlight, which has led to an increase in skin-cancer cases, especially in rural areas. Sunscreen, hats, corrective and dark glasses, long sleeved cotton shirts/dresses and umbrellas are desperately needed to protect them from the sun.

On the left we see Wyclef, who has albinism.



Persons with albinism also have personal safety concerns, stemming from social prejudice driven by harmful traditional beliefs, and connected to the trafficking of human body parts near the shared border with the Republic of Tanzania. Deprose Muchena, a spokesman for Amnesty International, says deep-seated cultural traditions persist, including a belief in mythical powers of people with albinism and a conviction that their body parts could change lives, bringing fabulous wealth, power or good fortune. Some believe that albinos are not human, and their only value is monetary and that they have gold in their bones. These two schools are situated in Northern Zambia, an area bordering on Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania where these unsubstantiated cultural beliefs threaten the safety and well-being of albinos. Elizabeth and Blessings (pictured here) have albinism.



Inverness County Cares members John MacInnis, Betty Jane Cameron and Charlotte Rankin travelled to the Zambian schools in January/February 2020. They each paid for all costs of their trips personally. John MacInnis is a retired electrician and 'Jack of all Trades' from Judique. Betty Jane Cameron is a retired obstetrical nurse, midwife and musician/music teacher from Mabou. Charlotte Rankin is a retired teacher and crafter from Judique.



Betty Jane arrived at the St Mary's School with a treasure trove of musical instruments most of which were purchased in Lusaka, Zambia, with donations of money from people in Inverness county who desired to support the arts at the school.

The children and staff were delighted to receive these wonderful instruments, many of which they had never seen before.

In three weeks, the music of the fiddles, guitars, flutes, drums and keyboards was drifting through the school compound. The instruments, music charts and reference instruction books stayed at the schools where the teachers carried on the legacy left by Inverness County Cares.



Charlotte Rankin (Inverness County Cares member) formed a close working relationship with the teachers and students. She taught and read text books to blind teachers to enable them to transcribe braille notes to prepare for classes. The educational resources are very limited at the schools. She was very active in the afterschool craft classes and introduced the students to the joy of knitting. Their difficulty in saying her name was a cause for a lot of laughter.



This marks a very significant event for these girls. They are breaking the gender barrier ... usually only boys are guitar players. This breakthrough was a cause for celebration. Sarah (with the red head band) is the head girl. Precious has black spots on her face, which sadly are precursors to melanoma. Christine, wearing a red shirt is blind and Angela the fourth girl has limited sight. Sarah, Precious and others with better sight can see up close and help the other students find their finger placements on the instruments. They are one of several groups of musicians who take turns to play for mass.



This is an after-school craft group. The grass is harvested and dried for a year and then made into brooms. Rag mats are also crafted by these students. These products are used by every household and sold in the village markets for a small income.

Their visual impairments create a safety hazard since the make-shift tools (razor blades) they use to create the mats and brooms are often sharp and easily slip when they are cutting the rubber inner tubes used to bind the brooms. Charlotte Rankin (Inverness County Cares member) taught them to knit which created a new interest for the students.



This is Betty Jane Cameron (Inverness County Cares member) toward the end of her stay, with Pascan the music teacher who has very little sight. He is teaching the kids to play their own native songs. They are using the chords they have learned and are playing their native songs for Betty Jane. It was a great feeling to see how they loved the instruments and were making good use of them. This occurred in just the three weeks since they first held the instruments.



John MacInnis (Inverness County Cares member) and the staff determined maintenance and repair needs at St Mary's school and helped with maintenance work on foundations, window repairs, roofs, light bulbs, water for showers and paint in the dorms and more.

What a difference the brightly painted girl's dorms made and the functioning showers in the boy's hostel are much appreciated.

When John asked why money wasn't budgeted for maintenance, the reply was, "Do you want to feed the children or fix the buildings?"



An albino child was abducted from St Mary's School with the intention of murder or mutilation, with the purpose to sell her body parts on the black market. An elderly lady spotted a large man furtively carrying a burlap sack with something struggling inside it. Police were notified and a child was found in a sack behind the large man's house. He was apprehended and jailed. Since this experience Sr Agnes' first priority is to increase the height of the security wall around the whole school compound. The generosity of Inverness County Cares donors has made the completion of the walls at St Mary's possible. The children and sisters at Kawambwa now sleep sounder knowing they are in a safer environment.



This wall at St Mary's in Kawambwa illustrates the height of a completed security wall.

St Odilia school in Mporokoso still has a vast amount of work to do before their walls are complete. Only one wall there has been finished. The other three walls at St Odilia will be completed as funding becomes available.



Sister Agnes is the school administrator for both of Chalice's school sites in Kawambwa and Mporokoso. She holds a masters degree in child development, specializing in handicapped and blind children. She has a great love for the children and often spends the afternoon and evening playing with the children at the Kawambwa school where she lives. In this photo you can see her in white, holding one end of the rope and Sarah (guitar girl) holding the other end. The children get assorted secondhand clothing which are not always appropriate for playing children's active games. They may be partially sighted and blind but they still participate enthusiastically in the games their sighted friends play.



This is the Primary class of children 5-7 years of age. The girl on the left is totally blind and this is her first year at school. Some children begin school at a later age and stand out as taller than their classmates.

They were very happy and dancing because of the gift of maize from Bishop Patrick of Mansa. He has a special place in his heart for disabled and handicapped children. This gift of maize will be used for their morning porridge and although the bags are very heavy, they are determined to get them in the storeroom.



There is always a need for age-appropriate clothing for play and for dress up on Sundays. These girls are hanging out together after school.



John MacInnis (Inverness County Cares member) is with the children, playing with homemade one-wheel homemade trolleys. The kind we can remember from back in the fifties!

The kids love to race with them, despite being visually impaired, they run with confidence and have no fear of falling or running into objects. It is certainly a fun way to develop motor skills.

The albino children have poor vision and the other children in this picture are totally blind. Joseph standing in back with the striped shirt, has limited sight. He has been at the school for several years and is very helpful to the new children.



Inverness County Cares wants to thank donors who provided tooth brushes, sunscreen, hats and t-shirts for distribution at the schools. These children are very happy and grateful, for they know the lifesaving value of these gifts.



These boys are former St Mary's School students. They are integrated into a large, boys boarding school at Nsagaluba, near Mansa, where they are assimilated with sighted students. In this photo they are using magnifiers donated by CNIB in Halifax. Their Canada hats were brought by Inverness County Cares members. They also received sunscreen, toothpaste, sun glasses and magnifying readers. The two boys at the back are totally blind and were given extendable white canes. These boys were happy to receive the messages and greetings brought by Inverness County Cares members, from their former St Mary's school friends.



These Grade 6 students are writing in Braille using their stylus and slate. All students in the school learn Braille since most low vision students will eventually become blind. Many albino children have limited vision and have difficulty with any visual task, as you can see by how close they are to their work.



These are the youngest students... it is the first time away from their family. They are four years except for the girl on the right who has entered school late.

These children are not accustomed to receiving love. In their home village many are shunned and not given affection or love because of the stigma associated with being an albino. They have wonderful house parents at Kawambwa, who live with them and care for them after school. These children need to be taught basic hygiene, social skills and how to form relationships with other people. They are all fiercely independent and will stand their ground... but respond well to hugs and affection.



The possibility of abduction on public transit is very real for albinos. Therefore, this crowded, modified 15-seater school bus is a necessity. It gathers the children from their remote villages each semester. It is also used for medical trips and numerous school field trips. Despite the bus being packed to capacity, multiple trips are necessary to gather everyone to and from school. Zambian roads are a challenge at the best of times and become barely passable during the rainy season making every trip an adventure. Inverness County Cares donors have contributed generously toward a new 28-seater bus which is in the process of being purchased with additional help from Chalice.



On Saturday morning all the children clean, tidy and organize their living spaces. Wash day is an enjoyable occasion, water splashing, children laughing and chattering as they work together in teams. The new students are taught the fundamental laundry skills and how to bathe themselves. These chores teach good work habits and prepare for future independent living.



This tall joyful boy on the left is totally blind, non-verbal and has Cerebral Palsy. He walks with difficulty around the school and yard, without fear and is a friend to all.

The school uniforms are made by the students and staff at Sister Bibian's trade school, where adults receive vocational training in tailoring, cooking and computer business training. They produce uniforms for many of the schools in the Kawambwa village.

These children are just becoming accustomed to wearing the school uniform. Most children come to school with very little clothing and wear the school uniform all the time, until they get clothing to change into after school.



These children are enjoying a very rare treat.

Many of the albino children arrive at school with dark lesions on their bodies, which will grow into skin cancer by the time they are eighteen. The dear children in this photo have already developed these deadly marks which are caused by exposure to the damaging rays of the sun.

The average life expectancy of an albino in this region of Zambia, is a distressing 30 years. Albinos lack melanin which would protect them from the UV rays which cause skin cancer. Lack of sun screen and appropriate clothing to protect them from the sun are alarming problems.

We thank you for your generous support!



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