

Dear Friends of St. Anthony's Nursery School, Malawi ☺ Dec 2011

I start this newsletter as I sit in a very crowded Blantyre Airport in Malawi waiting for our first flight home to the UK – Mark and I have just completed a very busy twelve day visit to Malawi and have mixed feelings about returning home. We will of course miss the wonderful children of St. Anthony's Nursery School, the fantastic Thorneycroft family and Chimpeni Estate where we stay, but sadly this year we won't miss many other aspects of Malawi. It's become a really challenging place with huge price rises, a lack of imported goods such as the First Steps nursery books and an acute shortage of fuel – the queues at the petrol stations were enormous and we paid £2.40 a litre for petrol! Thankfully the situation at the school is where the good news begins...



Noel, the Head Teacher, and all the staff have continued to work really hard to maintain a high standard of teaching as well as taking good care of the school building. We had a visit from Save the Children while we were there and the Senior Manager of Education and Child Development, Chris Mzembe, was really impressed with the nursery school. As a result he is keen to bring other early childhood development projects to the school to visit as he believes it is a model school – praise indeed! We were also told on a couple of occasions, by the teachers at the neighbouring primary schools, that the nursery school children are noticeably brighter, more confident and happier having completed their two years of education, proof that the school is achieving its aim of giving the children a better start in life. Mark and I spent time shadowing the lessons and picked up on a few further ways the teachers could improve their planning, techniques and content – we have been through this with the team and are confident they will try out our suggestions.

Generally the children were in reasonably good health, although we are aware of at least two who are HIV positive. It took them a little bit of time to warm to Mark and I having not met us before – thankfully the magic of balloons soon brought a smile to their faces and we had lots of small children reaching to hold our hands. We held a closing ceremony and party for the children on the 9th December as term one ended; I will always remember the children encountering marshmallows for the first time – some tentatively eating them, others didn't quite know what to do with them and used them more like a squishy ball!

After school finished each day we had a number of tasks that we wanted to complete. Very sadly all of the trees between the school and the road have been felled, leaving the school very exposed. We are told that the government plans to widen or move the road which is concerning given the proximity to the school, but at the moment there is no sign of any development – there appears to be a lack of funds! For now we have constructed a simple fence to stop the children playing near the road and Noel has promised to keep me posted on any developments. We also invested in 80 small plastic chairs for the children to sit on – the cushions and mats have become very worn so we are going to try out the chairs and see how they get on. Before our visit Noel had already renewed the school insurance and purchased copies of the First Steps books, unfortunately they literally are photocopies as we are struggling to get hold of original copies from Macmillan, something I will follow up with Macmillan back in the UK. The few other remaining tasks included purchasing a new school bicycle (the original one was recently stolen), meeting the school committee, increasing staff wages and awarding bonuses, buying paint and cement for general repairs, arranging for the aprons to be mended and also having a general cleaning day, tidying the classrooms and putting up new pictures and bunting.

Since I was last at the school I have spent quite a bit of time trying to maintain the peace between two members of staff who just can't seem to get along, Noel and Ousmane (the Gardener/Reserve Teacher). After discussions with both individuals, Cornelius (the nursery school Supervisor and Head Teacher of the Boys Primary School), Vincent (Zomba Catholic Diocese) and the other staff we have given both Noel and Ousmane written warnings and hope this may be the end of their dispute – I will be keeping my fingers crossed! Sadly Cornelius, who has kept a watchful eye on the school for the last two years, is moving to a new primary school in January so we have asked the new incoming primary school Head Teacher, Gregory, and his Deputy Head, George, to both act as Supervisors. Vincent at the Diocese has also worked hard to keep things running smoothly at the school and he will continue to do so. Mark and I feel we have left the staff and school with a strong (and local), support structure and network.

As many of you will remember from last year's newsletter we tragically lost baby Priscilla to malaria at the end of 2010,

the eight month old daughter of Martha (the newly promoted Deputy Head). During this trip Mark and I visited Priscilla's grave and planted five rose bushes. It was a terribly sad moment and a bitter reminder of how hard and unfair life in Malawi can be. I explained to Martha that the idea of providing all the nursery school children with mosquito nets was in memory of her beloved Priscilla. Whilst there we purchased another 40 nets for Class B and explained to the parents how the nets should be used (Class A received their nets in June). The support I have received over the last year in order to buy the nets has been overwhelming, thank you all so much - we will continue to provide each nursery school new starter with their own life saving mosquito net.

The school committee and staff will be cooking Christmas lunch for the children on 21st December, we have left Christmas balloons and hats to get them into the Christmas spirit. I know as I sit down for Christmas dinner this year I will definitely pause to think about everyone in Malawi and the tough daily struggle that they face. Malawi is encountering a very challenging time, demonstrations have already taken place against the government and with plans to further devalue the local currency, the Kwacha, there could still be difficult times ahead. I really do hope 2012 brings a fresh start and a better standard of living for the millions surviving on the poverty line in Malawi.

Thank you all for helping me keep St. Anthony's Nursery School a thriving part of Chilumpa village. Next year will be the tenth anniversary of the opening of the school and I am so proud that the school goes from strength to strength. Thank you all for playing your part in helping us reach that ten year milestone.

Wishing you a very Happy Christmas and a great start to 2012,

Gina x



New chairs



Mosquito nets



Fun time



Chisomo



Staff photo
2011



New fence



Puzzles

P.S. Mark and I are very much enjoying married life after our wonderful sunny wedding day back in March, I am finally getting use to my new name, Mrs. Saunders, and am thankful to have Mark by my side, especially in Malawi when I needed his support and help more than ever ☺



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Please send any donations by cheque payable to 'The Nursery School'. Thank you!