

My Year in Malawi with Project Trust 18/19

On 23rd August, 2018, I left my home in Cambridge and travelled 7,000 miles to make a new home in Malawi, alongside 7 other Project Trust volunteers, living and working in the unknown. I had only briefly met the other volunteers a month before on a week's training course at the Hebridean Centre on the Isle of Coll, where Project Trust is based. Knowing that I would be living with 3 girls that I barely knew was very daunting and I had no idea whether we would get along. Before my time in Malawi I had very little knowledge about the country, where I would be living and working, and in all honesty, I didn't really want to know as I wanted to experience Malawi first hand and not arrive with any pre-judgements or misconceptions. This has obviously changed, as after living and volunteering in Malawi for 12 months I could talk non-stop about the beautiful country and all the incredible experiences I have had, but I'm going to try my very best to put it briefly here and give you a little insight into my year.

Project Trust had partnered me up with Umunthu Foundation, a non-governmental human rights organisation that provides HIV/Aids testing, treatment and counselling for people in the local community. Umunthu Foundation was founded by a man called David, who was my host for the year and very much one of our "Malawian Dads", and is based in Bangwe, a sub-township of the city of Blantyre. Malawi is made up of 28 districts with Lilongwe (the capital) and Blantyre having the two biggest and most built up cities. During my year in Malawi I lived in Umunthu Foundation's guest house which is a 5 minute walk from the clinic, a 15 minute walk down a dirt track to the main road and about an hour on a minibus into the centre of town. Where we lived felt much more rural than it actually was as we lived in a typical Malawian village surrounded by traditional mud huts and maize fields. However, we were fortunate to live in a brick-built house and had running water and electricity (although very erratic).

Umunthu Foundation has many links with primary schools in the local area and so David set us up with voluntary work at Bright Era Private Primary School in Namiyango, a 45 minute walk from our house. Bright Era is "private" by name, however, it is nothing you would expect from a stereotypical private school you would think of in the UK. In Malawi there are "public" and "private" primary schools. "Private" just means a director is in charge of the money, not the government, and therefore the children have to pay fees each term. Everyone at Bright Era is extremely friendly and welcoming and I felt very much part of the Bright Era family. My partners and I were all given nicknames by the senior members of the school and therefore it was only fair we gave them nicknames too! Big Sam, Uncle Steve and Maisten have to be my favourite! The school is very basic and run down (would definitely not pass UK health and safety standards!) with only enough teachers for each standard. Bright Era Private Primary School has Standards 1-8 (equivalent to Years 1-8 in and England) and a pre-school (Nursery A, B and Reception).

My partners and I worked Monday to Friday as teaching assistants in Nursery A, the youngest class in the school. In Nursery A we had between 60-80 children aged from around 1-5 in a very small (4x4m) classroom, with very basic equipment and resources. School would start at 7.15, however the children in the nursery would be coming into class throughout the morning, so it often took a while for any lesson to start. We had a very basic and flexible timetable for the morning: morning introduction, one lesson before break, breaktime at 9am, one lesson after break and lunchtime starts at 11.45. Our main role in the nursery was to be a friend to all the children, help with lessons and mark books, assist Madam Chalira (Nursery A's class teacher) when needed and generally be a helping hand (lots of changing children with wet trousers!). As there is a large age range and lots of

very young children in the nursery, not all of them take part in the lessons and can be very distracting for the older ones. Therefore, my partners and I decided to set up a small playgroup so that we could take the younger children out of the classroom to play while Madam Chalira taught her lessons to the older ones. This would not have been possible without the great generosity of people in Blantyre and back in the UK who donated toys for our Nursery. We also organised donations of clothes for the nursery, as many of the younger children would wet themselves, as parents would often send their child to school without a nappy even though they hadn't been toilet trained.

At the start of the year I found working in Nursery A quite tough as the majority of the children speak very little to no English, so communicating and gaining their trust was very difficult. I found that the children also wouldn't listen to me and wouldn't take me seriously as they weren't used to having a Mzungu (white person) in their class or at the school. The children would often imitate things I would say and mess about as they thought they could get away with it. In Malawi corporal punishment is very much used in schools and as they knew we would not punish them in this way they thought they could get away with more around us. However, as the year went on and they became more familiar with us, they understood that even though we would play with them and be a friend, we were also one of their teachers and that we should be listened to and have the same respect as Madam Chalira, their class teacher. One of my biggest achievements of the year has to be getting all the children in the nursery to call me Madam or Katie instead of Mzungu!

At the end of the school year Bright Era Private Primary School had an Open Closing Day where all the parents were invited into school and each standard performed a couple of activities (songs, rhymes, dances and sample lessons) in front of everyone. A group of about 10 of the older children in Nursery A performed an Introduction, Wheels on the Bus, 2 Little Dicky Birds and then showed how they know the letters of the alphabet and what each letter stands for. Watching their performance has to be the proudest moment of my time at Bright Era as I could really see how the children had grown up from the start of the year in September, and to think that I was part of that has to be one of the most rewarding feelings. Every one of them did their bit perfectly and confidently (standing up in front of the whole school at the age of 3-5 is not the easiest thing to do, even I was scared for them); one proud mummy moment!

As we finished work at our main project, teaching at Bright Era, at lunchtime we had the choice of either having lunch at school or at home. For the first term we had lunch every day at school eating the school dinners which was either chips and salad, rice with beans/goat meat/beef and once or twice a week we would have what the teachers have for lunch, Nsima (maize flour and water mixed to a hard paste) with beans/egg/goat meat/beef and chinese cabbage/rape, the traditional staple food in Malawi.

In the afternoons it was up to us what we did and whether we wanted to find other secondary projects to keep us busy. It took us a while to get settled and start to think what we wanted to do but in October we found out that there is a youth club at the Umunthu Foundation, called Post Test Club, that we decided to join. The club runs every Wednesday and Friday afternoon from 3.30pm-5pm and is for youths in the local area of Bangwe who have been tested for HIV/Aids and want to learn more about their sexual health/rights and spread awareness of HIV/Aids. Before joining the club, me and my two other partners all got HIV tested so that we felt part of the group and didn't want other members to feel that if they had to be tested why weren't we. At the club we played lots of games, and each week a member of the club would decide on a topic which they would present and then we would have a discussion. I learnt so much about my sexual health and my rights and have become a lot more interested in it, as well as being able to contribute what I know already

from having a western background and education. PTC has also taught me a lot about Malawian traditions and culture. Witchcraft is a big thing in Malawi and although a lot of people will tell you they don't believe in it, they will be extremely scared of it and were always telling us to stay away and never visit a witch doctor. I have made so many good friends from PTC, was able to immerse myself into the community further than just working at Bright Era, and my partners and I have learnt so much by being part of the group and made so many friends that I still talk to today and hope I will see again one day.

In early March this year (2019), Southern Africa was sadly hit by a tropical cyclone, Cyclone Idai, causing devastating damage to infrastructure and people's lives. Hundreds of people died and hundreds of thousands more were affected throughout Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Although the area where I was living, Blantyre, was not the most affected area I was still seeing the impact it had on people and many of the houses in my village had been damaged or had collapsed during the very strong winds and rain. Being in the middle of a natural disaster like this really hit us hard and it was a huge realisation to us that even though natural disasters might not be happening at home in the UK, they may well be happening elsewhere. Very soon after the cyclone first hit Southern Malawi my partners and I decided that we really wanted to help with any disaster relief possible, focusing on our local community and staying local. We gathered together donations of clothes that my partner Rachel's aunty had sent over from the UK, and some from my parents and from my other partner Kirsty's parents, that they had bought over from the UK when they came to visit. We also bought a bulk of rice and donated these to an organisation in Blantyre that were taking goods to Chikwawa, a local district that was very badly hit in Malawi. We also decided to set up our own extra project and fundraise money to buy materials to rebuild one of the houses in Bangwe that had collapsed during the cyclone, and also hand out plastic sheeting to families whose houses had been damaged so that it would prevent any walls falling down in any coming rains. We managed to raise just over £2,500 between us which is amazing, and it makes me so happy to think that so many people back at home wanted to help my community. By doing the fundraising I have been able to spread more awareness of an event that didn't get much coverage in the news. I have also written another short report about Cyclone Idai that has more information about it and how we played a small part in the disaster relief.

During my time in Malawi I also had the opportunity to travel the country and explore other districts and the beautiful Lake Malawi. I was working to the normal Malawi school timetable so we had two weeks holiday over Christmas, two weeks holiday over Easter and then two weeks at the end of the summer term before we flew back to the UK. In Malawi the public and private schools don't have half term holidays like in the UK so the terms are very long (13/14 weeks with no break!). However, we were fortunate in that we were allowed to take occasional Fridays or Mondays off work so that we could have a long weekend up at the lake as a little break from work. We mainly spent our holidays at Cape Maclear (I think I've been there 7 times!) as this was the closest part of the lake to us and everyone there is so friendly! I have so many great memories from Cape Maclear: snorkeling with the cichlids, boat trips to Thumbi Island and Otters Point, kayaking and paddle boarding on the lake, getting mopeds to and from Monkey Bay to the Cape, and New Year's and Independence Day parties, the list could go on and on but that's just a few. At the end of the year we finally managed to travel further north and went up to Nkhata Bay and Kande beach. They are only an hour apart, however they are completely different; Nkhata Bay doesn't really have a beach, only big boulders and rocks, whereas Kande Beach has the best sandy beaches in Malawi! At Kande Beach we treated ourselves and went horse riding through the village and along the beach and then we were able to swim with the horses in the lake; very much one of my favourite things I've done all year! To end the

year we went to Cape Maclear for the last time to say goodbye to all our friends we have made there and go on one last sunset cruise with our favorite boat guide, Solomon.

Instead of travelling to other countries I have been able to see so much more of Malawi, although I still feel there is so much that I haven't seen and been to, both village life and the more developed and touristy parts of the country. My parents came to visit at the end of March/beginning of April and very much treated me with a small holiday to Huntingdon House at the Satemwa Tea Estate, the Sunbird House on Zomba Plateau and then a couple of days staying at Mvuu Lodge in Liwonde Game Reserve. It was so lovely to see them and spend time with them while seeing the other side of Malawi, although I did find it difficult and quite a shock going from living in the village with a basic life to having everything cooked for me, a hot shower and bath, and a very comfy double bed! I was also able to show my parents around Bangwe, Limbe and Blantyre so they could have more of an idea of the place I was living and they came to school with me for a morning to meet everyone which was lovely.

I would be lying to you if I didn't say the past year has been one of the most challenging times of my life. Living over 7,000 miles away from home and not seeing your friends and family for such a long time is tough. However, it has been the most rewarding time of my life and I would not change it for the world. I have learnt so much, matured as a person, met some of the most amazing people ever, and have some of the best memories ever. I've come to realise that the little things I used to stress about aren't as big as I thought they were and that we, living in the westernised part of the world, take so much for granted. I now have a much wider view and understanding of the world and I am so grateful for the opportunity that Project Trust gave.

Again, thank you to everyone that donated and helped get me to Malawi!