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Malawi Internship
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Malawi Children's Village Sewing Project.

My Malawi Internship

For the past three years, I have heard remarkable things about the Sewing Project in Malawi. Professor Graulich would enthusiastically talk about her beloved project. I would follow her annual reports and hear wonderful stories about her time with her "kids" in Africa. The most memorable stories were news about the construction of their own building. I had heard about the struggles, the accomplishments, and I had also seen a couple of pictures while the building was in actual progress. But nothing compares to all the exciting stories, until I was privileged enough to experience the Sewing Project in person.

After a bumpy and eager ride, we pulled up to the building, which was strategically placed in the back of MCV, Malawi's Children Village (this is by far the best location to have for many reasons). My first perception of this impressive building was what an astounding accomplishment! When you travel by matola bus for four hours from the airport to the small town of Mangochi, then the first night you arrive to a blackout, and you pile in the back of a pickup truck with 16 other people to get somewhere like it is another ordinary day, that is when you realize the true achievement of this building. It seems almost impossible that this project would survive, but surprisingly it has for eight years now.

Once I walked into the doors of the building, warmth, passion, commitment and the sound of the running motor on the sewing machines turned all the stories into a living reality. This project is possible because of everyone who partakes in it, from Mr. Sibali, the co-founder of MCV, Fraction, the fastidious manager of the Sewing Project, Ayami, the talented teacher and clever tailor, all the charming enduring tailors of the project, and of course the founder of the Sewing Project, Professor Nettie Graulich.

The internship is the reason why I had gone all the way to Malawi. On the first day at the Sewing Project, Professor Graulich discussed with me, what I am suppose to do and what is expected from me. The first thing I was to do is to call her "Nettie". The guidelines of the internship were kept pretty open, and I was to work on developing a children's line. There were three other main tasks I was expected to do: 1. Meet with a local tailor and learn about his business and lifestyle. 2. Get to know a tailor within the Sewing Project. Learn about his/her life and how he/she came to work for the Sewing Project. This would include a trip to the tailor's house in the villages. 3. Make clothes to pass out for orphans in neighboring villages.

The first week on the job, I had to fulfill an order for Rita's school uniforms. She wanted kabdullahs (shorts) for the boys and simple flared dresses for the girls, so I studied with Rita the exact specifications of the order. Most importantly, she told me what she liked and disliked about the previous order. This was a great opportunity for me to work on sundry new samples. Working alongside Ayami, we made the shorts bigger and wider at the waist, as Rita had requested. After finding the most cost efficient way to make the shorts, we agreed to make the shorts straight legged and without side seams. This in turn saved us quite a bit of fabric and time. This skill proved to become very useful in future orders. The dresses we fabricated had straps that fit on snugly, yet was wide enough to pull over the head without using any enclosures, and we also did this many other apparels. Zippers and buttons were available, but we did our best to exclude them for cost and efficiency. After the samples were finished, I was able to visit Rita's school and fit them on a couple of her students. When everything was satisfactory we began working on the full order. Robert, who was one of the tailors, was an expert at making the girls' dresses. Once a dress was cut, he was able to sew the dress with its gathers and hems within an hour. I was truly astounded at how fast and diligent all the tailors were. They had all been trained very well and they had obviously done a lot of speed sewing.

While one group was working on Rita's school uniforms, another group was working on Mandella shirts for the Palm Beach's work uniforms. These were the traditional shirts the local Malawians wore, and this order was such a great advertisement for us, everyone who saw them fell in love with them. We continued to make more Mandella shirts and we sold countless shirts to the Azungus (white man). Along with these shirts, we made several other garments and products for the tourists that visited Mangochi. The garments ranged from wrapped skirts to children's dresses and shirts. The products were the popular handbags, wine carriers, and other

accessories made in African print. Although these orders were not

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the main income for the project, they were sure the most fun to make and sell. And of course any extra income helps keeps the business running. July and August were the main tourist months where many Azungus come to visit MCV. One day while I was lost working on a project, Ayami ran into the sewing room and excitedly told Nettie something, as Nettie threw her arms in the air and began fervently screaming. I became so alarmed that I thought there was a calamitous fire somewhere. But thank God, luckily there wasn't any kind of fire! In fact Nettie was screaming "Azungus are coming, Azungus are coming!" so that everyone could quickly retain their role in setting up the shop. We swiftly pulled out the dozen varieties of products; some of us even began telling the visitors about our underlying stories, as we sold several handbags for some hard earned Kwachas (Malawi currency).

The more we sold, the more Kwachas we profited to in turn buy more fabric at the market. The market in Mangochi was a whole new kind of experience on its own. The open air market was made up of two main busy thoroughfares with several hundred stalls that lined either sides of the roads and alleys. You could find almost everything you need to survive in Africa. We were especially interested in the Jitenje (two yards of fabric). There were a dozen rows of stalls with fabric draped on extended ropes. The colors were vibrant, beautiful, eccentric, and welcoming, as these were typical African traits. With jitenje we could squeeze in 18 patterns of single wine carriers. This item in particular is profitable to produce because it is easy to cut, sew, fabricate, and very easy to market. This could even possibly be a lucrative product if it could be exported overseas.

In the past, most fabrics that sold in Malawi came from neighboring countries or even as far away as China. Even though cotton is a cash crop in Malawi only 5% stays within the country. Furthermore, there is a lack of factories that can weave cotton into fabric. Beyond the fabric shops, we were able to buy interfacing, elastic, thread, and buttons at random stalls. My first day at the market with Fraction, we would walk up to random stalls that sold toiletries. Fraction and I would leave the market with arms full of goodies that we had to lug back to the project, and it was quite an onerous endeavor.

Back in the sewing room, the tailors were finishing up the last orders for Makandi Tea Estate. This is a side note—Nettie calls them her "kids", but I cannot really call them that since they are practically my age. I was able to see Wedges and Solaju at their best. They had set up their station for screen-printing. Ayami refreshed Wedges on the steps of printing while reading over his notes. Ayami takes all his notes in English. This fact alone simply amazed me because it shows not only how intelligent he is, but it also reflects his aspirations to challenge himself and continue learning. This characteristic is so important and key to the foundation of the project since he is the sole trainer. The more he learns the more he can teach, and his motivation was clearly rubbed off on the other tailors. Everyone is generally excited to do excellent work, and they are very proud and eager to accomplish any task at hand. I observed this as I watched the process of the screen printing. And I also saw this in their assembly line as they made the work suits. Everyone had a specific expertise that they performed on each section of the suit. This allowed the assembly line to flow quickly and smoothly. Occasionally, there was a pause for friendly bickering, however I did not always understand what was being said. But then everyone would laugh and smiles would light up the room. Sometimes, a sweet melody and harmonious singing will fill the air. But at the end of the day, the assiduous work was always completed.

To keep the program working, the project needed big orders to fill. Every year, Nettie would come all the way from the States to find work. This proved to be a very difficult task. So the third week after we arrived, Nettie and Fraction journeyed to Blantyre to find work. Because all the previous contracts with local companies expired, this trip would make or break the entire business. They were being turned away at all the possible factories. These companies were stating that the price the Sewing Project offered was too expensive. The price was the lowest we can offer due to the high costs of fabric. Fabric used for the work suits could not be found in Malawi and are therefore imported, hence, the high cost. When things seemed hopeless, a light bulb flashed in Nettie's head. She came up with the brilliant idea to join the competitors. This was almost ingenious, yet this logical savvy idea would only come from the mind of true entrepreneur.

The Sewing Project being a much smaller factory, decided to propose a business deal

with a larger factory, Exclusive Fashions. The well known company agreed to helping out

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our project. While we were scrounging for work, they had plenty of extra work they were able to pass on to us. The labor price would be minimal, but if done in a large quantity, enough income would be made for the Sewing Project to run self-sufficiently. The fabric will arrive pre-cut, and all that we needed to do was to assemble everything. With practice and the smooth flowing assembly line, we aimed to produce at least 2,000 prison suits a month. This plan had resolved several pressing issues. First, this would give us continuous work. Second, we would not have to worry about resources since their company would supply any necessities. Third, transportation is always a pestering problem. Their factory, being in Blantyre, would even handle the delivery process, coming and going. Also the tailors would become quite efficient when repeatedly working on one project. This would soon lead to higher volume and more income.

To assemble the prison uniform within the Exclusive Fabrics standard, Ayami would have to be trained within their factory, so we all made a trip to the factory. This was my first time going to an apparel factory, besides the Sewing Project of course, and I was very excited.

The other fieldtrip that I took was to the tailor in Mangochi. I was very shy and reluctant at first, but with encouragement from Nettie, I managed to spend an afternoon alone in the market of Mangochi with my tailor Michael. Michael and I spoke about life as a tailor in Malawi, as he paddled his sewing machine and I sat across from him on a plastic crate. He told me about his family, his three grown kids, and his wife who had passed away in the recent years. This is a common occurrence in Malawi, because people pass away unexpectedly, and sometimes there is not even a definite reason as to why people pass. It is just a major fact of every life in Africa. But life goes on, and people make ends meet in any possible way. Although, Michael was one established tailor amongst many tailors who set up shop along the dirt road with their sewing machines, he still had to make ends meet by traveling on the local matola a far distance to work every day. This was especially gruesome for him, since one of his feet was incapacitated. I asked him why he did not get a bike, so at least he would not have to wait by the side of the road every day. He said that he does not have enough money for such a high priced convenience. Transportation is such a tremendous disadvantage in Malawi. Just imagine when it rains—and we complain about gas prices.

I also learned several quirky ways businesses worked in the local tailor world. Customers would stop by throughout the day for many different tasks. The tailor would fulfill commissioned orders of garments, fix zippers, patch pants, and make curtains--almost anything that calls for a sewing machine. Zippers would be replaced on the spot for as little as 60 Kwachas, roughly 50 American cents. Curtains were easily gathered and sewn together. With the lack of measuring tapes, the client would come in with a long string, which would roughly represent the dimensions of the single window in their house. Dresses would take one or two days to finish. Michael used a top of a showcase cabinet as a table to draft the patterns of the dresses. I took a peak into his spiral notebook that contained all the different orders. A common measurement that came up often, besides the usual shoulder, waist, and hip measurements, was a twist measurement. I had to ask Ayami what a twist measurement is. For the most part, it is where the gathers are attached to the rest of the garment, usually at the elbow and the bottom of a skirt. They really do love their gathered flares, since most traditional African garments have these.

My visit to Madi and Wasi's village gave me deeper view of the traditional African life. The two kids came by our house early one day to pick me up. Nettie made us delicious Dutch pancakes. These kids would rarely get the chance to sit down at a dining table for a meal, but their table mannerisms were impeccable. They were respectful, cordial, and observant. Working at the Sewing Project has not only taught them how to be expert tailors, but it has taught them life values as well. Fraction constantly lectures them on how to behave, strong work ethics, polite social skills. They have been exposed to education on HIV, living healthy, and even saving money. I had been interacting with these kids my entire time here, but after meeting other Malawians for the past five weeks, I realized that Nettie's kids were very well-mannered in comparison to other youths their age and even many years older than them. This is a drastic development in character that I observed.

After breakfast, I follow the boys on my bike to their village, which was supposed to be close by. It had to be over 5 km away. I was astonished they had to ride over 12 km back and forth every day, rain or shine, to get to work. They did not seem to mind though. They were happy they have a consistent job that paid well. We first visited Madi's home. I was introduced to his mother and his twin nephews. It was surprising to see that his nephews were extremely shy. I'm used to little Malawian kids running after me screaming "hello!" from the top of their lungs. Madi explained to me that they were scared of me since I was in their house. They don't often see people who look like me standing in their back yard. There were little ducklings running around the back yard. They occasionally sold ducks to make some money. His mother made rugs woven out of straw for extra money. His older brother also worked on farming. Other than that, Madi's paycheck was the main income. He was able to save up enough money to build himself his own house, made out of mud and straw. The house was a room less than 9' by 9' and a curtain separated the bed area from the living area. Wasi also had his separate house similar to Madi's. He also had a little dining set table, like the one you would see at a children's tea party, and he was extremely proud of it. It was amazing to see that with what little they had, they kept so carefully. All their clothes were hung up and their beds were made. Wasi even had a radio that he listened to every night.

We spent the rest of the day with me asking questions about their stories. Wasi, like many other orphans was introduced to the program by his village volunteer. They are trained without pay for over six months. In a place where time seems to be taken like a grain of salt, six months sounds like eternity. But both of them, like the other smart kids in the program, endured through it, looking forward to the steady work and pay. Madi heard about the program through Wasi. Since you do not receive a bike until several months later, Madi rode on the back of Wasi's bike at the beginning. When asked what they would be doing without this job, they replied nothing. They would be wandering the village hungry and poor. They are very appreciative to be given this once in a lifetime opportunity. Because they are both orphans and could not afford to continue to secondary school, this job gave their life a future. They hope to be working at the Sewing Project for as long as they can.

For the time that I worked in the program, we saved money from selling whatever sewn goods we had. The money was used to buy three rolls of fabric, which were made into clothes for orphans of the local village. Originally I worked with Phiri and Florence, outreach employees of MCV, to gather information on the orphans that MCV looked over. I worked with Ayami and Nettie on sizes and style that would easily fit most children, since we are limited to working with woven fabrics and cannot make clothes in each size. The girls had colorful long dresses and we made shorts for the boys. Nettie and I took a trip to a local market to get t-shirts from bales to go with the boys' shorts. My last week in Malawi, we took a trip to two local villages. I brought along my roller suitcase full of clothes. When we arrived, the village volunteers came with a swarming group of kids. We called out each kid's name, and they stepped forward to receive their brand new clothes. Some of these kids' clothes were so worn out the holes in their garments showed more skin than covered it. Some kids did not even have bottoms, and one girl had nothing but a piece of worn out fabric to wrap around her bare body. They were extremely thankful for their clothes, and one kid in the village cried because he did not receive any new clothes. It was so heart wrenching, but he was not an orphan, and the clothes were made specifically for orphans.

How I felt after this trip to the village summarized all my bittersweet feelings for Malawi, the warm heart of Africa. It's truly heartbreaking to see so many people, even so many more kids, have next to nothing and survive through so much, just to get by every day. There is so much that you want to do to help, and you can even give them everything you own, but that will only last for so long. In order to really make a difference in their lives, they need to be taught how to self-sustain, fend for themselves, and how to make their own lives better. In my opinion this is the best aspect of the Sewing Project. These kids are taught technical skills, life skills, and social skills that will very well change their lives. These acquired skills will enable them to flourish and succeed in life. Sometimes there are complications along the way as I watched as Nettie overcomes so many hardships. And I was only there for six weeks, yet Nettie does this every year. It is obvious why this program has been successful for so long, all because of Nettie's devotion, resolve, optimism, and dedication which has made the Sewing Project a paragon from

so many other projects.