

February 4, 2004

Dear Nhimbe Friends,

More than two weeks have passed since I wrote you last. It seems like a month with so many experiences bubbling up in my brain. So much happens in such a small amount of time, and most all of it not part of any routine. My mind, body and soul have been on overdrive, and all is holding up well. Most of the time I feel very healthy, passionate and intent but then am ironically bothered by funny tiny bug bites on my toe. Symbolically, of course, the miniscule creature/s came to me on the day of a traditional wedding, which was followed by a funeral in the night sloshing along a flooded road, bringing me into my most vulnerable places, dealing with the highs and lows in heartbreak here.

We are all sharing in this process of pushing the Nhimbe for Progress wheel through sometimes apparently unimaginably thick mud. Primarily Cosmas, Dana, Molly and I have felt the crunch as we've been aware of the many details that had to be accomplished before their leaving yesterday. I leave next week and am counting the minutes. Each trip I strive to leave things in better order, with more completion in details and relationships, as well as coming home more relaxed. And every year I'm seriously challenged to meet these goals.

DOCUMENTARY & ASSISTANCE

The filming process unfolded naturally, with Spirit offering many unexpected opportunities. Dana and Molly became part of the Nhimbe team, going to and from places, recording as we went. Sometimes off by themselves with translators and other times right by our side. They have wasted time waiting for transport repair, the phone system to work, and money from the bank, just like we do. All of those things are symbolic of personal empowerment, and sometimes none of us have any, and we all learn an odd acceptance of the circumstances. But in a genuine African style, we are always finding some ways to hang with it. Molly and Dana have had the first-hand experience of tracking unavailable supplies traveling intently from one store to the next, getting the pictures and letters of over 200 school children and many preschoolers, and of hearing the ongoing discussions on how to win the battle over the next few hours. They've watched as we strategize the complexities and breathe life into our otherwise tired, worn out psyches.

With one smart media card giving a card error, we are hoping a solution can be found when they are back home to save the pictures. If anyone has a lot of digital experience with this situation, please write! Other than that difficulty, the filming opportunities have been incredibly successful. The rains that began after the prayers at the last ceremony have barely ceased offering the not-so-perfect back drop for the end of the road filming, but farmers are happy for the next harvest will be better. Nothing like that gray cloudy sky to make us feel at home as if we are in Oregon. We were praying for just one night of last minute Zimbabwean sunsets and managed to get 1 ½.

Having their help this year has re-emphasized the need again for assistance on this journey. Molly was half time helping me and the remainder of her time was on the video. She will be sorely missed. I can't begin to tell you what a relief it was to have her helping. Dana pitched in with extra hands and alertness that was always appreciated. Next year we absolutely need a full time person to make more sanity evolve.

Here is a note from Dana and Molly on their last morning here:

3 1/2 weeks have passed too quickly and yet so much has filled them. We have had the honor to experience Shona ceremonies of prayer and celebration, a wedding, and the richness of *mbira* music. We have also seen up close the inner workings of Nhimbe from stove, toilet, and hut building to the profound effect of education in these children's lives. We have recorded these images and sounds to bring home to the US and weave into the story of Nhimbe. It is our hope that the video we create can have some of the impact on those who watch it that this incredible experience has had on us, and that they will respond both with their hearts and their wallets. It has been like running a marathon to try to keep up with Jaiaen...she has endless energy for this work and it is quite amazing to see how she has found her way into an integral position in the community, both professionally and personally.

For as much imagery as we have to review over and over again back in the States, I think the most vivid memories will remain in our hearts...joyous smiles, moving music, vast landscapes painted with African light, a feeling of connection with people from half way around the world who speak another language, and yet we have come to understand each other.

HEALTH

We made major progress last week as we met with The Centre in Harare, which is an HIV/AIDS outreach organization established in 1994. They are setup to educate and counsel individuals as well as train teachers about survival skills. What they pass on is basic to anyone's survival, not just someone HIV positive and so it fits our overall goals exceptionally well. We are preparing to work with them over the next few months to bring awareness about health through education to our villages. This is really exciting as we have tried to make headway along these lines on each trip but haven't managed before.

This year, two things came together to help make this possible. First, Elizabeth Chechio from Santa Fe, and I finally met and talked about our projects when I was in New Mexico in September. She is an American acupuncturist and teacher as well as a nanga herbalist here, who is setting up a HIV/AIDS relief program with The Centre as a base.

Second, we received a donation from a Trust in North Carolina that really made the financial difference to be able to consider this focused effort. The wonder of it all is that the Trust heard about us from someone who knows someone who knows my husband's boss's sister. I don't know if I got that perfectly right, but you get the idea. You who know and love Nhimbe are the best for spreading the word effectively! It's quite a miraculous process. And we are all so very grateful.

Our plan is that we will take the outreach educator to Mhondoro. She will provide a 2-1/2 day intensive with the headmen and elders of the villages, to include up to 40 people. This is in keeping with traditional ways of a top down approach. Their curriculum covers everything from nutrition, cooking and raising herbs for healthy living, to HIV/AIDS awareness, counseling and forums, and networking support groups for various concerns. It even covers reflexology, the power of positive thinking and lifestyle choice making, for example. The headmen and elder men and women will get a thorough overview of all the details. We will be providing an educationally nutritious lunch to make the cooking part of the presentation more experiential.

The next phase will be to arrange the next group of 40 for the full 5-day intensive. We plan to do this twice so reaching 80 people. At the end of phase 2, we will have provided 120 residents with this education. That is about 1/4 of our adults. Then we will take the cream of the crop from that process, and train those who demonstrate leadership and an ability to be a teacher. This will help our village educational process to be more self-sustaining. We are fully expecting self-

directed Health Workshops to continue after these courses. People are pretty “jigged up” about it and the timing is perfect. We do have some well educated people who are already contemplating this wonderful opportunity to change the face of rural life. After we complete this, there will be a 3-½ day refresher course to help the teachers in their area of expertise. For example, one person teaches how to raise and use certain herbs for health and longevity, and someone else teaches reflexology, or food preparation choices to retain and provide the best nutrition.

The very promising aspect of this program is that The Centre is run entirely by people with HIV. Because the trainer is able to say, “I am a woman who is HIV positive”, while she is looking radiant, saying intelligent things and having no fear of disapproval, she is empowered. This is not only for herself but also she is empowering others to be free, share their feelings and fears, as well as be genuine in the moment with her students. I am very excited to see this come together after so long in the queue!

The potential here for healing is incredible. I’ve seen many women opening up already, just hearing about it. Women are often suppressing any desire for more information about HIV as it’s not culturally attractive. Often there are husbands who discourage them from getting tested and it is turned back on them saying “So I know what have you been doing to be worried about this”. Thanks Elizabeth for the information about The Centre and its function! And thanks to the Trust in North Carolina for giving us the financial choice!

SOAP MAKING

The soap making supplies and equipment-on-loan arrived in Mhondoro. A happening team is making it happen! We made one batch of 145 bars last week and will hopefully make two more batches this week, each exceeding that quantity. A bar of soap actually measures over one foot and then it is broken or cut into pieces. I have asked our sculptors to make a special gift soap mold and so we’ll see if that will work on the next batches. Our ingredients are high quality and we are using palm oil instead of beef tallow, in case we end up able to bring this as an export product to our vegetarian and otherwise animal lover American friends.

Our essential oil contact in South Africa, whom we met through Avraham Sands from Israel (thanks for the introduction!), has been very helpful sharing contact info for a Dutch physician couple in Zimbabwe who are also involved in an uplifting community soap making project. Soap making may be the first real project that could help sustain Nhimbe on this soil if it can grow during these difficult times. We will be estimating the costs involved of taking the next step to handle more raw materials, storing finished product, and having a workstation for the process. The man who taught us, Alois Chidare, has had a dream to start a company like this and so it’s quite synchronistic that he fell into our lap. Having a manager in the wings is pretty miraculous. And to think that this came about over breakfast tea! I was asking my sister what I might be able to pick her up from the wholesale shop; what does she use every day? Soap was the answer. We discussed further and she directed me to the neighbor’s twin brother, Alois.

Our goal is to make a health oriented soap as a way to economically involve more people in industry where there is none, educate on the topics of health and sanitation, as well as raise funds for Nhimbe for Progress. There is great potential to create less dependence on our donations, which began our process 4 years ago. Everyone uses soap every day and so we believe we can compete in this market with some smart effort. A family member here works for the Spar chain and thinks we might very well have a chance of using them as a distributor eventually, if we can produce consistently. This is a definite key of basic business advice for

anyone wanting reorders, as the repeat customer is a happy one, and keeping them happy with an abundant supply makes the business prosper.

Cosmas and I were discussing this in terms of the longevity of Nhimbe. We have a 4-year-old. You know, you start thinking about saving for college and things like that. Realistically, we don't want the entire project resting on our personal ability to raise money for the rest of our lives. Life is a tenuous thing, and if either of us was to cease being here or cease being able to do what we do, we don't want all these people to go back to suffering because there is no fundraising efforts. Last year when Baba passed on, and then Cosmas came to the states for 6 months, many villagers were heart sick thinking that might be the end of Nhimbe. Charles Muungani, the tutor and now Nhimbe counselor, being a great thinker of his time, moved in and helped to reorient the team so they could continue to plow. Being able to raise some of their own funds here has such great potential, we are absolutely thrilled for the long term! It's like an investment fund for everyone's future, the children, and adults, all 1,000+ of them.

OTHER MICRO LOANS

Besides helping get the soap making started, we are also helping an experienced mbira maker get some basic tools to make *mbiras*. He has been filing the keys with a broken bottle! I'm amazed at how good his *mbira*'s sound considering the situation. Lodi asked him to make Ancient Ways students some *mbiras* to learn on until they are ready to buy their own, so I will have a few training *mbiras* available. We have simply bought a grinding stone, file, vice grips and a C-clamp (since we can't find a used vice), and a plane for Nhimbe purposes that he will also use. We are buying all things second-hand so that it is a small loan.

At this point hyper-inflation makes it impossible to even provide a "soft" loan and so are loaning with no interest. It's unreal to expect to pay high interest rates to keep up with inflation and additionally I really don't want to be in the banking business. It's not my cup of tea for sure. We do hope to buy some children's *mbiras* from him before I leave though. I do seem to have that merchant blood and am always looking for unique products. These will be simple and not resemble any particular traditional mbira that we study, but will instead simply be a gourd with tuned *mbira* keys inside for preschool, kindergarten, and young children. They are sold here in the open markets so he also could potentially take his product to town.

The loan to the textile cooperative is also producing fruit. Both the knitting and sewing women are very busy. Some of the sewing is going into school uniforms and some into export items. After some feedback from the states we have improved our "scrubs" design and are continuing down this path. The fabric off-cuts are going into potholders, eyeglass cases, and place mats, as well as scrunchies, and this is going well. The dresses and *javas* are also coming along beautifully. The women are working hard knowing that I leave next week and it will all be easier if things are complete by then. Get ready to bring some great Zimbabwean fabrics into your lives!

CURRENCY

We hear that the exchange on the street is around 3500 zim to 1 usd, with the bank remaining at \$824. That is a drastic change since December's almost 6,000. It is a better sign for the economy and I've seen some prices in stores being lowered, but things are still exorbitant. We hear that the exchanges are still taking place just about anywhere you might imagine, truly. We are working on some new options for our situation here, as keeping an ongoing project moving forward, such as stoves, is going to require resources to match the current situation.

In previous years it seemed so strange to see small coins on the ground amongst the gravel and dirt anywhere I would walk. This year these coins are everything including the \$5 coin. We find them in little piles here and there. I was disbelieving at first look since my first instincts are still ingrained from my background. My godmother always kept change in a jar next to her bed. Now my husband puts his pocket change in a drawer every day and we have a weekend at the coast once a year. So this morning we went to an open market and there on the ground in the dirt was a \$20 bill. I knew that with the current exchange it wasn't much, but I thought maybe it would be worth something in their thinking. I was wrong. We showed it to the shopkeepers and they laughed and went on with their work.

When we first got here and heard the exchange was at 5,800, we were grappling with the conversions of what that would mean. At that time the \$20 was worth less than half a cent. We decided that in a moment of desperation a person could use it as tissue since toilet paper is not provided most places one goes. Toilet seats are also not common at all, if there is a fixture to put it on. So this morning at the market, I indulged and bought a toilet seat for the house here where I stay. I paid \$25,000. Sounds like the stories about the US Defense Department buying toilets seats for some unreal amount. I can't believe I've waited this many years. Sometimes my frugality gets the best of me.

STEALING

Since I was here last January, the toilet flushing mechanism inside the tank where I stay was stolen 3 times. That crossed the line and so they bought a large padlock, which now is locked each night before bed. (Most houses in the area have outside plumbing in a separate room.) Stealing is a way of life here for many. Every day some new con or creative theft occurs. Our stovetop welders, who are along the road to our home in Mhondoro, tell us that the electricity was out for a couple of days; we heard it was because people are now draining the transformers of oil and then using it and selling it for vehicles. Also the copper wire that is inside the transformer is being stolen and sold for recycle.

Last year before Cosmas came to the states, the store he operates in Mhondoro was broken into and much inventory taken. A small amount of Nhimbe preschool food was part of the theft (they left so much behind we wondered if they had a soft spot for Nhimbe). This year Cosmas' home in town was broken into and again we were both affected. And now today, one of my sons tells me of a story involving two older women conning his young uncle, similar to stories I've heard in the states, but it was the young being tricked by an elder, instead of the other way around. Most everyone is desperate. But this is also a time when a person with values really shows themselves. Obviously it's not wise to tempt people foolishly, but in simply respecting normal boundaries under the current circumstances, I find that the authentic nature in people really shines with the gold in their hearts.

HUT BUILDING

We are going to be able to build about 6 or so huts this year, one in each village. We are still rebuilding huts, which were destroyed by inclement weather, including Cyclone Eline and the flooding from the following year, as well as lightening strikes. Sometimes they choose to build for the elderly, disabled or someone with another cause instead of just rebuilding the collapsed huts. These decisions are made by the *Sabhuku* (village head man) and negotiated with the help of the village representatives. Our system of a male and female from each village acting a liaison seems to be working well.

TSOTSO STOVES

We picked up 6 stovetops from the welders and are under construction! We nearly sat on the welders to keep things moving once business opened up on the 15th. We are experimenting with a new suggestion on building the elbow, (which is the firebox and chimney, shaped like a 90-degree drainpipe). The new design uses 3 square tiles which make up a puzzle of squares and L's forming the elbow. My father was a clever inventor and puzzle fellow and I know he would have loved this new elbow. We are going to be trying this new idea, as it's been used by Aprovecho and is conceivably easier to build. All clay in our region is really very poor for pots (mom doesn't even like to buy them). The elbows and tiles fit that category too. We are experimenting by adding a small touch of cement, which is available to us and not too costly. The drawback may be that it will suck some of the heat in a system where we are trying to be so fuel-efficient. We shall see.

These stoves are definitely in a research and development mode, but we have been exploring this since my first trip in 2000, and at that time the women were already on board, exchanging information about their *tsotso* stoves. So we have some basic designs and tools to work with. I'm excited that Tichaona (a name meaning "we shall see") is heading things up and is going a great job. He is motivated as his family has experienced many benefits from Nhimbe in the past and also finds the whole concept quite interesting. We bought a tire pump for the repaired bike so he can get around. We have found that the welder up the road is one of the bottlenecks and so want to find a new welder or set up our own welding operation. Thanks to Marian Grebanier, Zimfest Association, and a women's band in Colorado we are giving the stoves an ongoing priority in 2004!

TOILETS & HEALTH

We are working on implementing a composting toilet design this week and hope to try out our ideas very soon...prior to my departure. Denver has done much research and has suggestions for modifications that fit the local materials. I am hopeful that we can get things rolling (like with a bio-activator – is there something from nature we can use?) as I understand that isn't always easy to get things breaking down, but once its working, it's very effective. If anyone has any contact information for some NGO, like composting-toilets-without-borders or something like that, please have them email! If there is anyone willing to offer help over email please write as Denver has email at Internet cafes!

Denver will also be implementing an educational program on the use of charcoal as purifiers for the body and for water (Thanks Jerome Hobbs for the quite perfect help!). A charcoal filter could help in town also, as many of the educated people here rent or own a place in town and also live in the rural area.

SCHOOL

Denver will also be left with research to do to build the earth oven for the preschool bread making. He is a bright young man and is becoming an important asset to Nhimbe. Cosmas has been helping him for many years and so is like another son to him. The oven will be part of an outdoor kitchen that will be set up for the Preschool as well as the soap making operation since it all happens in the same area. (The soap making requires an open fire and a barrel for a pot.)

We have completed taking the school pictures and handing out their letters. Thanks to Eugene Peace Academy we had enough peace hearts to give all of the younger children present at the Village meeting. We actually were exact down to the very last one – it was quite a serendipitous moment. The children loved receiving something. Thanks to Lynne Swift for donating excess

stickers and a poem. We were able to provide those to the older children who received no letter from their sponsor, so everyone went away happy, curious and sharing their treats! Those who received a letter from their sponsor were in heaven and many have written you another letter since receiving yours. Due to time constraints we weren't able to set it up in a better order.

We also provided awards for the highest Nhimbe achievers in school last year. This year we gave them pens, pencils and exercise books, all of which is needed for school functioning. Since we bought some books for the library as well as the tutor's reference books, we felt that the book money was better spent on many people needs instead of only one. Some stickers will be available to our tutor also, who can use them motivationally as he sees fit. The residents here, adults as well as children are so very grateful for the library. We only need to figure out how to help it grow. Shipping books here is very costly. Buying books here is very costly. This needs research...any volunteers?

SCULPTURE

We have picked out most sculpture for this year and hope to be shipping soon. My husband and I each gave the carvers hand tools to make the most out of their time, for which they were grateful. They have some new design ideas this year, as well as the traditional. We continue to encourage creativity in their carving and so each piece is a little different. We are not really able to provide a mail order catalog these particular products, since we have few repeats, but could do a special order. If anyone has any suggestions for stores or great shows for table selling, please write!

STRANGE TWISTS

So I explained that my husband's suitcase was missing when he arrived here, and that Cosmas also lost two pieces of luggage upon arriving but has only received one. So when Lodi returned home in January, he lost another suitcase again. That one arrived within a week or so and was hand delivered to our home out in the country in Oregon. So now last week, his first suitcase just arrived after being gone for almost 2 months. This seems ludicrous but is apparently part of the times. The only personal thing missing after the long journey here was a bottle of wine! That's pretty amazing considering the lock was gone.

IN SUMMARY

Daily I am moved to tears by the simplicity, the earnest hearts, and the symbiotic nature intrinsic in this culture. Instead of perceiving the Shona people through the beautiful music which led me to find them, hearing the interlocking lines and feeling the polyrhythmic sounds, all of those have been replaced with authentic people, real souls, and genuine lives. I hear their interwoven thoughts, feel their heart sounds, and must pray ardently for us all.

Bless those of you who carry Nhimbe close to your heart. We are all one. And in that there is power. Power through simply love to unite and change the world. It is said that 2 people, who come together, are more than just 2 people. My religious upbringing tells me that. Some also say it is really 2 to the power of 2, because you have the starting point of the one person expounding through the energy of the second person of like spirit. And then that is also manifest in reverse, so it's really 2 to the second. We are larger than our wildest dreams when working together, and that is why Cosmas suggested the name and the idea that we *nhimbe* in the traditional sense.

This is a slow process - this thing of transformation, transmutation, transfiguration - I want to encourage your spirit in fortitude and determination to stay the course, as we ourselves are committed and without you behind us, we are nothing in this function. My godmother, also behind me, feeds me tenacity to work with and become steel. Under the right conditions I'm malleable, sometimes a conduit, sometimes a shield, and always working to remain a sharp and useful tool that can cut through the illusion.

Many blessings for you in your life from here in Zimbabwe,

Jaiaen