

Racecourse Update: Julia Gummo's Visit

May 13 to July 13, 2013

The dusty, copper-coloured landscape of Kitwe, Zambia already feels a memory from one lifetime ago. Returning so suddenly back to my life in Victoria, BC doesn't provide much in-between time to process the striking differences of Zambian culture and that of Canada. While it seems tempting to slip back into my regular routines as an urban-dwelling, action-oriented, busy university student, I think that the greatest favour I can do for myself right now is to slow down, and take a generous chunk of time and space to reflect on the two very meaningful months I spent in Kitwe.

It had been five years since my inaugural visit to Zambia, and it was so exciting to revisit the familiar grounds and faces of Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, (where I lived), and to be reminded of that unhurried walk to Racecourse school.



My primary role in Zambia was to be an agent for the Racecourse Fundraising Initiative, based out of St. Paul's United Church in Edmonton, AB. The goal of the sixty-day trip was to promote and maintain a sustainable partnership between the school and the initiative – mostly by working on some administrative tasks that are required by the Canadian Revenue Agency for charitable organizations working abroad. What did that really look like? Well, I worked on a variety of issues at Racecourse O.V.C such as construction, budgeting and auditing, re-writing a school constitution, re-establishing a school board, opening a second bank account, understanding school needs and challenges, purchasing artwork to be sold in Canada, and capturing photos and video of the school while maintaining

regular communication with Heather Mackenzie, the project manager of the initiative back home. This was an interesting and exciting position...definitely a figure-it-out-as-you-go type of job! The best I could do to prepare for the journey was to plan to be as open-minded and flexible as possible, and to have several crash-course phone calls with Heather before I left.

Here's a basic breakdown of each of those tasks, and how they were left by the time my trip came to a close:

School Construction

The second school block at Racecourse is a 1x2 classroom building. The construction of this block was nearly completed more than a year ago, but had since then been left unfinished. There had been some confusion as to why the work had not been completed. During my stay, I had several opportunities to meet the architect who had been in charge of the project. He was on very good terms with members of the theological college, and seemed like a good person to me. The previous work had been halted due to miscommunication between the previous chairperson and the architect. We had several conversations regarding the importance of finishing the work – and getting it done in a timely fashion. We had a new quote put together for the remaining work, and were able to have the last funds transferred from St. Paul's to facilitate the construction. The work started in mid-July, and I am waiting to hear an update of how it is all going. If all goes as planned, the work should be completed by now.



Constitution

One of the CRA guidelines for charities working abroad is that a written constitution must be provided by Racecourse OVC School. The previous constitution that the school had was quite out-dated, lengthy, and looked more like a rulebook

than a constitution. I had two meetings with the school board and a few chats with the Ringtone, the head teacher, and Stephen, the deputy head, about the organization of the school board, the roles of the school leaders, the structure for donor partnerships, etc. We were able to come out with a fairly solid constitution. I plan to forward along the typed version to the chairperson soon.

School Board

Since the previous chairperson moved on, there has not been a functioning school board at Racecourse OVC. It actually seemed like there had not been many regular meetings since 2009. I worked with Rev. Kondolo - the current chairperson, and Ringtone to try and establish a new school board. We were able to come to an agreement that the board should consist of about 10 members, three of whom were to be chosen from the Mindolo United congregation by Rev. Kondolo. By the time I left, the board had just six members – two from the community, one from Mindolo, Harriet (a senior teacher and treasurer), and Ringtone. I am hopeful that the board grows by a few members, and that they hold meetings four times per year, as was discussed in the last meeting we had. I made up some blank templates that board-meeting minutes could be recorded on and then sent along to St. Paul's. Hopefully that will encourage the maintenance of communication between Edmonton and Racecourse in terms of what is discussed at meetings.



Budgeting and Auditing

With the release of funds in February from St. Paul's, it was outlined that a portion of those funds should be used to hire an accountant to do audits at Racecourse OVC. After some discussion with Ringtone, I came to understand that the money intended for an accountant was used up – some grade 10 students (that had continued to high school with sponsorship from Racecourse) were in a pinch because their school fees were not completely paid, jeopardizing their opportunity to write their final exams. So, the extra dollars were used to pay those fees. When I sat down with the school board, I stressed the importance of hiring a reliable and qualified individual to perform partial and annual audits at the school – to promote financial transparency and accountability. Having audited accounts would probably make the school more attractive for prospective donors too. I wrote up a brief letter of understanding that the school board signed – agreeing to make the accountant a priority upon receiving the next transfer of funds from St Paul's.



Bank Account

A big portion of my time with Racecourse was spent trying to open a second bank account for the school. This account was a requirement from the CRA for charities operating abroad – the charity needs to make fund transfers to an account that is specifically and solely used for that donor's money. There were a bunch of documents that needed to be written, signed, photocopied, and filled out, but eventually we completed the application and submitted it at Barclay's Bank. The process of opening the account was only supposed to take 5 days, but I just got an email on August 9th saying that the account had been opened...a month and a half later! That's okay; I'm glad that it finally went through.

Needs and Challenges

Another big part of my visit to Zambia was to ease communication between the school and the fundraising initiative. It was nice to be right there at the school - talking to the teachers, the chairperson, the students, etc., while hearing about any

issues or changes that were taking place and being able to easily communicate those things back to Heather in Edmonton. One thing that I worked on was developing a 'quarterly update' form that will hopefully be filled out four times per year and sent back to Canada – in hopes of keeping up-to-date with the goings-on at Racecourse. Ringtone and I filled out the first one together, and I printed out a pile of blank ones so that they could be filled out and sent over in the future.



Artwork

In previous years, Heather purchased artwork from a talented Zambian and brought them back to be sold as a fundraiser for the school in Canada. I connected with that same artist and purchased 200 cards and envelopes from him on behalf of St. Paul's. The cards will be sold at fundraising events to earn extra funds for the school.

Photos and Video

Two big passions of mine these days are photography and videography. The beautiful folks at Racecourse made it easy to take some pretty nice shots that will likely decorate the fundraising initiative's website soon...maybe some will also be printed and sold. I am also in the midst of editing a short video about Racecourse OVC School – hoping that it will be a good way to showcase the school at fundraising events, or to give curious donors a peek into life at Racecourse if they don't have the chance to visit themselves.

What a trip. Two months in Zambia flew by so quickly. After being in Zambia for three weeks in 2008, I thought to myself, *next time I will definitely go for a longer visit*. Upon returning from this past trip, I thought to myself, *I need to go back for a*

longer stay! Needless to say, I have fallen in love with so many aspects of life in Zambia and the Zambian people that I was so fortunate to encounter.



Thanks again for all of your support for my journey,
and thank you for continuing to support Racecourse School.