

January 19, 2007

From Fleas to Friends

About the time we got our electricity, phone lines, and water back (although we only get water in toilets and showers for about a half hour a day and there's never hot water), we discovered we had fleas.

Fleas, in case you've never had them, are tiny jumping terrors that can crawl inside anywhere, bite over and over, and escape long before you can catch and squish them. They lay eggs—thousands of them—in carpet, clothing, and hair, so just when you think you've wiped them out, they're back.

In a country like Africa, where most dogs live outside and roam free, dogs very often have fleas. That's why an outside dog NEVER becomes an inside dog. Apparently the kindly couple who used our house while we were gone in the U.S. didn't understand that rule. Our neighbor who visited them commented to them that the dog needed to stay outside, but the damage had been done. Adam considered sending them a nasty profane letter, but I held him back.

Adam and I can count somewhere upwards of sixty bites on our ankles, not to mention those scattered over the rest of our bodies. The kids' bites are fewer, but more swollen since they lack the self control to not scratch them.

So we've been fumigating. We washed all our clothes and all our bedding (twice), took rugs outside, bleached floors, and fumigated.

That's the miserable part of the story. Now for the good part.

On the night we had to leave our house to set off a can of flea-killing fumigating spray, we stayed with some friends, Barbara and JD. It was a lovely evening. Everyone should spend a family sleepover with neighbors now and then. We traded names of contacts for our respective work, and talked until late. My encouragement tank is overflowing.

And then, reluctant to set foot back in the flea house, we packed up and left for our new home! Until a month ago we were mourning the loss of our wonderful home on the herb farm. After the past week, we couldn't wait to get out, and we're counting blessings by the dozen about our new house.

I flushed the toilet three times in a row just to marvel at the water flowing right back in. The whole family took hot showers. Our landlord is lending us most of the furniture we need. The walls are still being painted during the day, but it's the first time we've ever been able to choose the colors of our living space.

The house is smaller, and made of echo-y cinder-block walls. We also have to drive fifteen minutes to see our good friends Sofi and Jabu who used to live within walking distance.

But there's so much hope here. We went for a walk down to the edge of the property, which contains a large pecan orchard, to a river with rapids and a small waterfall. Our landlord has sheep, and our neighbors have rabbits right at the edge of our yard. The kids played all afternoon and evening without asking for a single toy.

Our landlord hires one large Zulu family, and all of them live right next to us. One sweet fifty year-old grandmother greeted us across the fence already, and I look forward to growing that friendship.

We hope to stay here for the next three years, which is longer than we've lived anywhere in our seven and a half years of marriage. The home has been an unexpected and rich blessing.

First Loan Client of the Year?

On the way to our new home, Adam took a wrong turn. As we turned around, we noticed a familiar face. Ana, whose story I told to hundreds of people in the U.S., was waiting for a bus. We had lost her phone number and I wasn't sure where she lived, but now here she was magically in front of us.

Ana's story is my hope for our organization. Ana has HIV, and recently started taking anti-retroviral drugs which have brought her back to health from the brink of death. She heard from Betsy about the idea of starting a business, and decided to buy herself a stove. Now her teenage daughter runs the business, baking muffins in the morning and selling them at a nearby factory. With the profit she has bought herself a new school uniform and meat for the family.

Ana did all this without a loan. But now that she knows she can succeed in business, I asked if she'd be interested in taking a loan from us. Better yet, I asked if she knew two or three others who could join a group of loan clients with her and learn from her experience.

She said she'd be happy to start a loan group.

This is fabulous news. Our field worker had spoken to dozens of youth and their parents over the past month and so far hadn't found a single person willing to commit to taking out a loan. I left our discussion wondering if we were crazy to think this project could ever work.

But Ana brings me hope. She can't have a loan until she can find two other youth and their adult mentors interested in joining. Then they'll have to agree on a time for bi-weekly loan payment meetings. But at least she believes it's possible.

Overall, our first staff meeting went incredibly well, also. The staff member who we considered firing was a helpful and positive contributor to the group. I thank God for these people and look forward to weathering the next few years' challenges with them.