

October 12, 2006

Bird chirps, accounting headaches, and plans

I sit outside writing this while the smell of the fire heating our water reminds me of cooking fires in Nicaragua. I can count the chirps and warbles of at least five different birds. I just spent an hour in our new hammock reading the Bible and poetry, and my heart feels like it just took a warm shower.

I needed that. After an hour sorting accounting records from the past two years, I was cashed. I have the kind of patience it takes to crochet an afghan, but less of the kind of patience it takes to put a thousand numbers into the right boxes on a computer screen.

Still, there are many reasons to think positively. I came back last Friday from a week-long trip with Betsy and one of our best Zulu staff members, Xoliswa (she's interviewed in a Northwestern article, October 1st). We visited the Small Enterprise Foundation (SEF), a microfinance institute similar to ours that has twenty years of experience and over 35,000 clients. What an encouraging visit, to see they have attempted similar work to what we do, and made it work!

I should add that Adam, meanwhile, did a spectacular job back at home with the two kids for a week, even managing to shop for a car and continue the long process of getting VISAs lugging kids everywhere. When I came home we reviewed my ten pages of notes from the trip to SEF, and then spent another couple hours hashing out plans for next year.

There's a lot of changes in the works, some more certain than others. We plan to have a smaller staff (there has been as many as 6 local staff, and we'll likely cut down to two), pay them based on clearer incentives (how many successful loan clients they manage), work with some orphans out of school (we had been doing only in-school meetings), work more intentionally at finding orphans (we had been allowing any youth interested to join), redefining rules for loan payment (making things stricter), and writing a policy manual about all this stuff.

Adam calculated the other day that if payments continue as they have been going, we would expect to have students pay back about 60% of the loan and interest money they owed. Sounds discouraging, but it's up from barely 5% last year (more than that finished their loans, but MFY created jobs for them to earn money). Still, we hope for more successful young entrepreneurs in the future.