

October 28, 2006

Hello Board

I see it's been a ghastly long time since I've written, so I bet I could come up with some news to write. Let's see.

We met with our newly formed South African board today. They're a wonderful mix. A Zulu high school teacher, an Australian development type worker (Sofi), a home based caregiver who took a loan from us, and a Zulu man who has translated for Betsy since the start of the project. It felt so good to have feedback on the little ideas in our head, learn we're not crazy, and get a lot of hopeful feedback that this project just might work.

We presented to them a whole list of challenges in the project thus far—things like how to find the very neediest youth and not just the boldest who sign up, how to instill discipline in kids who are used to just being told what to do and expecting their dreams to crash, how to avoid annoying hang-ups like schools canceling school or cell phone coverage failing at a moment's notice, and how to get kids and mentors really working together.

But the plans for next year seem to have potential. We decided instead of calling the program Microfinance for Youth here in South Africa, where microfinance can mean loan sharks who charge like 200% interest, we'll call it Youth Empowerment Business Organization, or "YEBO," which means "yes" in Zulu. At meetings we'll repeat the slogan "Yebo, singakwazi!" which means "Yes, we can!"

In one of the schools we'll keep working similarly to what Betsy had been doing, but we're dropping the other school we had worked with. Instead we'll try an out-of-school group in the same area. Kids who go to school could still come, but it gives us a way to really search out kids who have dropped out of school. The word "youth" here usually means people as old as 25, and some 25 year olds are in fact still even plugging away at high school (living in poverty makes it hard to attend anything consistently), so we've raised the age limit to include anyone age 15-25. The youth would have to meet with a group of five youth, and every one is responsible for every other one's loan (this is how microfinance often works). And we've added the plan that a mentor—a parent or close adult friend—has to come to every single meeting with the student.

Betsy told a story today that gave me a picture of the cool potential of this mentor plan. She knows a woman who has AIDS and has been close to death many times. The woman has several kids, one of them about 16 years old. She, like many African women, is incredibly hard-working, running her household and even a little business. And she wants desperately to teach her kids how to run a business, because she knows her time alive might be short. So she sends them out to sell things when people come out of factories, or around the school, or whatever.

It's this kind of person we fit perfectly with. They get a loan to boost their business, they get a formal way to work with their kid to pass on skills, and they build relationships with the people in their group. For other young people, who may be orphaned of one or both parents already, this is a chance to put an adult in their life who has to really care about them. They learn discipline, they learn they can do something to aim toward their dreams, they work together... I love it.

We'll see what happens when the rubber hits the road next year, but there's so much potential, I can't help dreaming.

AIDS Out Loud

On Friday Betsy showed a video about AIDS to about 130 students. It was a mad-house, with a room packed with students who had been promised a free movie and popcorn, giggling and heckling about sex. Our staff person went hoarse yelling over the crowd, but kept her cool spectacularly. And at the same time, I could look into the audience of young people and see most of them were downright serious and scared, and probably glad they came.

Straight talk about AIDS, sex, and STDS is still hard to come by, and though it's not in our job description exactly, it's a little thing to set up that could make a huge difference. When our staff member asked the students to write questions after they saw the AIDS video, nearly half the questions had to do with "how could we possibly not have sex right now?" It's a sad statement about the society, that these 14-20 year olds can't even imagine abstinence.

(By the way, they did get to see a fun two hour movie after the AIDS video, too).

Home Sweet Home?

Oh, and we just heard that we may have to move out of our lovely herb-farm home. Our landlord wants to rent it to a shop manager who he might hire next February. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. There's a chance we might strike a deal with him and be able to keep renting here, which has the advantages that we like our neighbors, our mountain view, and our farm-yard.

But it might also be the shove we need to move closer to the black community where we work. That was our original plan when we moved to Africa, but it wasn't as simple as we hoped. It's tricky to find a balance meeting our needs for privacy, having a theft-prone car and computer, and a little nature, but also being willing to live with the people we're here for. Now that we know some people in the black tribal area, though, it just might work.

A Dozen Interesting Things

I recently challenged myself to take 15 minutes and write “A dozen interesting things about my life right now.” I emailed the results to some friends, but I thought it might be fun to post them here, too.

1. I’ve eaten mulberries in at least 5 different ways this week.
2. My new favorite Zulu word is “umshongololo.” It means millipede. There’s lots of big snake-like ones around. Phoebe carried a four-inch one in the house the other day, but a friend said they might bite.
3. I have sore feet from a four-hour hike by a waterfall and up a mountainside. Adam and I have two days of vacation while friends watch the kids!
4. Yesterday I and our staff had a one-hour lesson on non-violent communication, especially for black-white relationships, which included role-playing with a giraffe puppet.
5. I saw baboons today.
6. I’m reading *The Book of Ruth*, by Jane Hamilton. It’s fabulous so far.
7. Adam and I just learned we love “ginger beer,” which is soda, not beer, with a strong mouth-tingling ginger flavor.
8. Phoebe told Adam the other day that “Some people don’t get married. Like Mama. She didn’t get married.” Adam explained otherwise.
9. Nearly every day we make a fort of blankets. Phoebe takes out every pillow and blanket, Zeke face-plants and rolls around on them. I think we spend 90% of our time building, 8% cleaning up, and 2% sitting in the finished forts.
10. I found a piano in a storage building right in our yard! It’s out of tune, but right there and free! God is so good.
11. We’ve been eating mostly vegetarian, but the other night we had friends over for a weekly Bible study and made hamburgers and fries. Adam ate 3 burgers. The friends came late, so the Bible study got cut short and I missed the whole thing putting kids to bed. Bummer.
12. In just over four weeks, we’ll be on another 48 hour journey across continents back to the U.S. The last trip went so well, by the grace of God, I haven’t even worried about this one.

That’s my list. Got a list of your own? Love to hear from you.