



Malawi – Katie Bell



I volunteered in Blantyre, Malawi in a primary school for a year from September 2023 – August 2024. Read below about my experience!

As a 2-week-old baby, I flew to Malawi with my family and lived there for three years. I had always been eager to return, so after finishing school I took the opportunity to go back to Malawi with the charity Project Trust. Project Trust is a Scottish charity which has been sending volunteers abroad since 1967 to various placements.

September 8th marks the day I left cold Glasgow to embark on the adventure of a lifetime. I flew to London to meet the other seven volunteers, and we then set off to Ethiopia and onwards to Malawi. There was a mixture of excitement, apprehension, and nerves as we were all unsure of what to expect. We arrived at Chileka airport and were surprised by the size of the airport as it was so small, then on the bus we drove to Blantyre in complete silence as we absorbed the bustling markets, vibrant colours, scorching heat and the sheer chaos of Malawian life. The reality had hit us that after a year of fundraising and preparing we were now actually here and there was no going back...



The next day Mrs. Chirwa came to collect me and my partner to go to our new home in an area called Namiwawa. For the first three months I lived with a host family, the mother was called Lillian Chirwa and her husband Winston Chirwa together they had three children who were all in their twenties as well as many noisy chickens and a dog Zena. Below is a picture of the room we lived in:

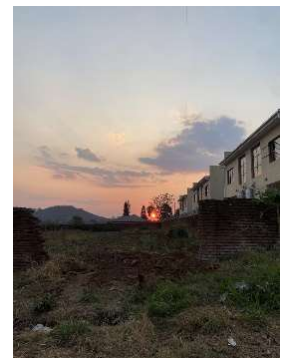
As you can see, we made a tent with a mosquito net, and a fan placed between us to combat the unbearable heat of the hot season which would reach close to forty degrees most days. The heat, combined with mosquitoes constantly eating you and singing in your ears and the occasional sound of gun shots made it quite an



interesting set up, however all part of the fun! The experience of living with the Chirwas was an amazing start to the year as I had the support of a kind family to ease to me in. I ate typical Malawian food each day – Nsima (a maize porridge), chicken, beans, and vegetables - which I miss very much now. I learnt the geography of Blantyre and how to navigate my way around the town to places like the school, the markets and where the other volunteers were staying. I became familiar with the word “mzungu” (which meant white person) and began haggling for everything as I was charged mzungu price. I got to know with the way of life while living there, from how to shout down a minibus and began to learn how to speak to people in Chichewa.

I was able to get to know the family and discovered where their home village was in Malawi and how Mrs. Chiwa started Sparrows Primary

School and had been the director of the school for many years. She made me familiar with the education system in Malawi and I discovered that although there was primary school education available to all children, very few children moved into secondary school or even university as there were major hurdles to overcome and also because most families could not afford to pay for it. Below are some photos of my time spent with the Chirwa family:



In December, my partner and I moved into our accomidation place for the remaining 9 months. This was nice as we had some more freedom like cooking for ourselves and space. There were the fairly regular power and water cuts, however I got used to them and tried to always have a head torch and a tub of water at the ready!

The school I volunteered at was called Sparrows Nest Primary School and it consisted of a nursery section then a primary section of seven grades. The school was located on the most beautiful campus just below Soche mountain, so I was able to enjoy a breath-taking views every day. There was a lady outside the school selling mandasis (a fried Malawian pastry) for 100 kwacha or 10p, so I had a fantastic set up! To get to school I woke up at 5:30am and then walked twenty minutes over a field (seen to the right) to the main road which was where I boarded the school bus. The walk was quite entertaining



during rainy season as it made crossing the river very challenging, balancing on a precarious wooden bridge! The school was called a private school, this was different to a standard UK private school and it meant the parents were expected to pay a small sum each year to support the school for materials like books.

I taught grade 3 and grade 4 at Sparrows; in grade 3 there were 25 children and some real characters in this class! The age ranged from seven to ten years old. I taught grade 3 maths throughout the year as well as doing part time maths tutoring with some of the learners who were struggling. In grade 4 there were 45 children whose ages ranged from nine to thirteen years old. I taught them maths, science, expressive arts and also did part time tutoring with a few learners who were struggling. I spent majority of my time with grade 4 throughout the year, they were an amazing class full of hard working, smart and kind kids. The way the Malawian primary school system worked was you had to achieve a certain number of points at the end of the year to move onto the next grade, so a few learners were resitting the grade and occasionally many times. This in addition to other factors like support from home resulted in such a variation of ability



in both grades, to the extent that some of the kids were able to answer difficult maths questions and some who did not know their three times tables. This was a massive difficulty when teaching as some kids fell far behind then became frustrated and upset, whereas some found it easy and lost focus. This meant I had to change the lessons so they catered for everyone, giving challenge questions as well as extra support.

The maths course for both grades was great and it covered topics like long multiplication, division, fractions, time and money. In the science course we covered topics like energy, different technologies and their uses, marketing, parasites, photosynthesis and vertebrates/ carnivores. Lastly, expressive arts was a combination of art and drama and throughout the year we had great fun doing things like making musical instruments and performing plays. I did notice that a lot of pressure was placed on the kids to perform and be successful at such an early age, and the content they would learn was sometimes quite advanced for their age in comparison to the UK.



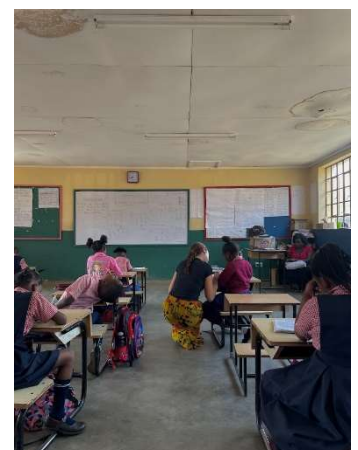
I worked Monday to Friday during the year with a break for the Christmas and Easter holidays. On typical school day I would wake up at 5:30am, which was tough as I am not a morning person, then have some breakfast and get to school for just before 7am. Then lessons would start, and I would teach from 7 to 12, then we had lunch for thirty minutes. After lunch I would do around 2 hours more teaching as well as doing some tutoring with a few pupils who were struggling with maths. The school day ended at 3:15pm, then I would board the school bus and either go to town, the gym or meet friends. When I arrived back home, I would cook dinner which would be painfully repetitive normally pasta, vegetables or vegetable pasta, then lastly I would do lesson planning for the next day. Every Wednesday afternoon was a sports afternoon, and the entire primary section would head down the road to the field to do dancing, running, football or other fun games. In Malawi it would get dark around 6pm every day, so most people tended to go to sleep much earlier and then be up early around 4am to do washing and cleaning to start the day.

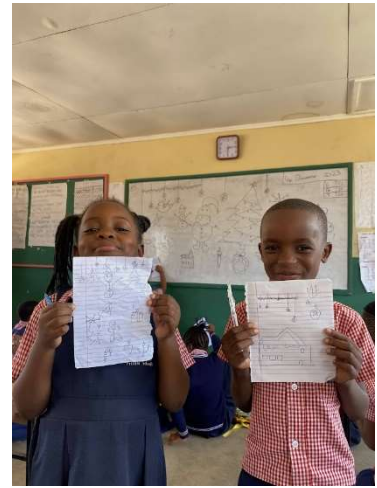
During my time at Sparrows School, I met some amazing people who I will now have lifelong friendships with. I visited the teachers' homes, meeting their families, attended funerals with the staff, planned events like sports day and Christmas closing ceremonies, taught them Scottish dancing and learnt so much from these incredible people. Aunty Veronica was a teacher who I became close to throughout the year. She taught me so much like how to cook a delicious chip meal (to the right) certain phrases in Chichewa. I hope to return to attend her wedding next year.



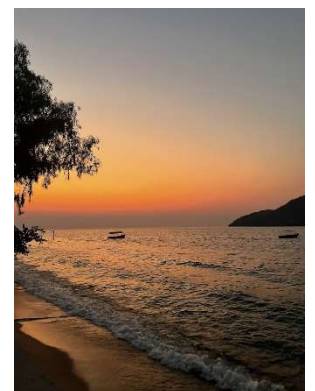
The kids and staff were fascinated with the UK, seeing pictures of my life in Glasgow and for the kids especially, understanding the concept of snow. There is a culture of sharing everything in Malawi so the kids would often ask for the food I brought in, and in return offer me something... which one time was “Ngombi” a fried insect which I was hesitant to taste however the kids insisted. At the school everyone found it hysterical when I spoke Chichewa, so I would learn expressions to use in class when the children were misbehaving.

My role as Aunty Katie at Sparrows was the most incredible experience and it was the saddest farewell to say with lots of tears after 11 months of teaching. Below are some photos of my experience while volunteering at Sparrows Primary School.





Within the group of the eight Project Trust volunteers, some were working at orphanages for kids who parents died of HIV, During weekends and holidays I visited and spent time with the kids there. I was very fortunate to have family friends in Blantyre from when I lived there as a young child and spent lots of time with them as well as the Malawian friends I made. Other activities



consisted of going to our favourite shop called DAPP which was a charity shop that sold branded clothes for under a pound, going to the gym, watching the Blantyre Bullets playing football or going on nights out. I loved travelling and being able to experience new places and cultures, as well as meet new people and hear many stories. Some of the places I travelled to throughout the year included Lake Malawi (and yes I did get sick with the parasite) Zomba, Mount Mulanje (the 3rd highest mountain in Africa), Liwonde, and many other places. Then for the final few weeks I travelled to Tanzania and Zambia with friends and family. I ended the year with two of the other volunteers, Sophie and Leo, on an amazing adventure to Victoria Falls which was worth the 30 hours on buses, and we camped right next to the falls. I was able to see many incredible animals throughout the year including being chased by a baboon one morning, which was a close call! I will miss transport around Malawi as it was either in the back of a truck, a bike or on a ridiculously full mini bus. Daily life was always very exciting with the unexpected always happening and dealing with Malawi time which would normally result in an extra 4 hours wait for any scenario.



There were some challenges throughout the year, however I am sure these experiences will benefit me in the future and I have learnt from them.

In comparison to the western world, Malawians live a happy life and value what really matters. They have so much love and I love the care free way of life. Every day I met so many kind people with smiles on their faces despite the hardships. Malawi is called “the warm heart of Africa” which summarizes it very well. Malawi is the most beautiful country with the friendliest people I have ever met. I will cherish the experience I had, and memories made this year. I hope to return as soon as possible, and after university, I want to work there as a doctor.



I am incredibly grateful for the support I received from my family and friends, my school and charities for this incredible experience.

