



Makuzani was a concept
Steve Vinton, July 17, 2007

We all spent the night in Godfrey's home village. It was hard getting up this morning, mostly because we had gone to bed late the night before, and partially just because, well, just because. Occasionally life can be so full of so many emotions and thoughts that you just feel like you want to just lay in bed in the morning and soak it all in and not get out of bed and somehow keep the day from starting.

I wish Susan had been with me yesterday; I was glad she wasn't with me on Sunday. Sunday was when we drove again to the place in the road where Susan's niece was killed seven years ago in a bus accident. Natalie had been on her way just after graduating from college to come and join us here in Tanzania, to work alongside us, to teach with us at the very first school that Susan and I had started here in this country. Her mother was with us this summer and I wanted somehow to arrange for her to get to that little bend in the road where the bus lost it's steering and crashed seven years ago. Not that I myself wanted to visit that place again and have all of the emotion of the memories of it all come back again. Sometimes I think I've figured life out, in the sense of understanding that being a Christian certainly doesn't inoculate or insulate us from the pains of this world no matter what some people, well-meaning but misguided, like to teach these days. In fact, being a Christian couldn't do that, because if it did, what faith would it take to be a Christian if we saw all around us that Christians like magic never got killed in accidents, they never got AIDS, they never had anything bad happen to them, they were never poor or hungry or in need – but then sometimes in the emotion of it all I can't say I've figured anything out at all.

But yesterday, I wish Susan had been with me! It was yesterday that I stood there at Makuzani, that school that Susan and I built literally out of nothing, that school where her niece Natalie was supposed to come teach, that place that we left the day after Christmas in 2003. All I could think of was how hard it had been to leave. Necessary, certainly, but still painfully hard. Had we not left, though, I would have never gotten my masters in education, we would have never started Village Schools International, this dream that has become a passionate cause for us and for so many would have never become anything more than a dream, and there would be none of what we are a part of today -- these eight schools where already 1651 kids are studying today. Yup, we had to leave Makuzani, it was all absolutely necessary in the grand scheme of things, but I remember we both felt that a part of us was dying when we left. You can't love, and then leave, and not hurt, and the greater you love, the greater the pain is that you feel I guess. So it was hard to come back after three and a half years. Not hard in the same way that it was hard to go back to the scene of the accident. But still hard, having to go through the emotion of thinking about it all.

It was easy though once we actually got there. The wonderful welcome of the new Headmaster, of all of the teachers, of the students! Oh how I wish Susan had been there to feel it all. Feeling love is a magnificent feeling. A treasure. To look at the desk that had been mine when I was the Headmaster of Makuzani Secondary School. To look out through the window in the teachers' office and to suddenly remember the evening I was in that office looking out that window watching the

sun set and seeing my students unloading a truckload of bricks in the near dark and to remember all of their hard work that had gone into building that school of theirs. And to walk with Godfrey back into the classroom where he had been my student and to look at that same blackboard and see all of the images of Godfrey and Emmanueli and Janerose and all those who had been their classmates. To walk out of that classroom and look out and see all of the foundation stones that we had carried for what was to be the new administration building. To look out and see the empty field where I had plans of building new classrooms and a library and laboratory. Yes, today was the day more than three and a half years after Susan and I left Makuzani Secondary School that I made my first trip back there to visit the school. It was wonderful to see that place. I soaked it all in and felt a tremendous amount of joy and happiness, but the real beauty of the day wasn't in what I saw, or even in what I remembered, or even in the emotion of what I felt in my heart. The real beauty of the day was in the words that were spoken and that's what I wish Susan had been able to hear ...

I wish Susan could have heard Emmanueli standing up in front of more than 500 students and remembering aloud what it was like to be in the very first class of 14 students. He pointed to the classroom where it all started and laughed with them about how a wall of the classroom had collapsed one day – but then he got serious and told them that they had never given up, that they endured the freezing cold, that they carried bricks, that they rebuilt the original classrooms and then built more and more, because they wanted an education so badly. And his hands waved across the whole of the school and said these are the classrooms that we, Mr Vinton and all of us, his students, that we built and that you are studying in today. And he said that we learned so much at this school that didn't come out of a book – we learned to never give up. And he looked out at all of them and said, no matter how hard it gets, no matter how hungry you ever are, no

matter how discouraged you might be one day be, never, never give up.

I wish Susan could have heard Godfrey when he stood up and told them that they might look at him and see him as the Director of Village Schools Tanzania – the organization that everyone is talking about that is starting schools in villages all across the country. But that they needed to look at him and understand that he was a student at this school, that he came from a village in this area just like they did, that he had been the student council president, that he had carried bricks and hauled stones, that it was at this school that he had learned not just math and physics, but that he had learned how to serve. And he let that sink in and then challenged them to study hard and finish school and to come and join us in serving, to become a part of Village Schools Tanzania with us, and to work with all of their hearts and souls towards that day when every single child will get to go to school.

I wish Susan could have heard Janerose when she stood up and again spoke from her heart about the right of every girl to get that chance to go to school and to practically plead with the girls who were there, no matter how hard it would get, to never let anyone or anything keep them from going to school. When Janerose speaks, she speaks from her heart, with the truth of the reality of the life that she herself has lived. She can bring a crowd of adults to the point of tears when she recounts not just the painful story of her life but the real miracle that she, a little girl from the village, actually succeeded in finishing against all odds. What is great when she speaks though is that even though she talks about the little things that Susan and I did to help her get an education, she makes the point so beautifully that it was Godfrey, and Emmanueli and all of her classmates who kept her going, who refused to let her go under each time she found herself sinking. She inspires those students listening to do as she and her classmates did – to look out for each other, to share food so that no one

goes hungry, to not let anyone drop out of school without the rest of the class intervening, to live as a strongly-bonded family as they all did back when we were all at Makuzani together. I love listening to Janerose speak!

But the statement that made me really cry inside was the one that was made by a teacher who looked at me and said to me, had you not started this school in 2000 with those 14 students, not only would these 525 students here today have no place to study, there also would be no Village Schools Tanzania starting schools all over the country, because it was from this source that came forth those who have gone out and are making a difference today in the country. And then they read their speech and presented me with a letter and asked me if I would be the official “guardian” of the school. It took no time at all to arrive at the answer. As I said to them, we may have eight schools open, we might be working on projects to build another seven schools this year, we might well be working towards the goal of starting 56 schools in villages all across this country, but even if we end up building 1000 schools here in villages across this country, my wife and I will always love Makuzani Secondary School and the people in this corner of Tanzania. Because this was the place when war forced us to run from Congo that we were received and welcomed and loved. This was the place that God used to bring to our hearts the vision of doing something unique and wonderful and special – not just of starting schools, not just of working to take the gospel into villages – but also of starting an organization that would be run by Tanzanians, that would launch a movement of people all across this country to make a difference in the lives of the poorest of the poor, the neediest of the needy, to bring change!

And therein was the real beauty of the day! Something that started out so small – 14 students, freezing in a classroom that was half falling down – had welled up, not just into a wonderfully built school that educates hundreds of kids, it welled up finally into the

creation of Village Schools International. I’m not sure who first starting saying it – I think it was Pascal – but whoever it was it became their rallying cry: Makuzani was a concept. That school was an idea. A vision. A passion. Just like Village Schools International. Something absolutely unstoppable because it is in the hearts of people, it reflects their great desire and their great determination. It is a call from God to do something to change life for those at the bottom.

I told them today that although I dream and long for the day when every single child in every single village here in Tanzania gets to go to school, it is very possible because of the huge number of villages where schools need to be built that no matter how hard we work together in the coming years that I might not live long enough to see that day come. But that if they join us and keep that dream alive and push and never give up they might actually see it happen.

Godfrey and I walked into the classroom where I used to teach him math. The same blackboard. I looked at that room and I could see all of their faces again. Godfrey sat in the row of desks on the left next to the window. I could see his face back then – so young, so eager. We walked out of the room. He wasn’t a student any more. There he was with his nice suit. He had the keys in his pocket to the car. He knew how to use a computer. He was directing an organization that was enabling today 1651 students to get an education, that was starting schools in four regions of the country. He had dined with ministers, spoken to large groups of people, talked at universities, spoken in churches, held town meetings on hillsides, and now he was addressing the students at his old school. We left Makuzani and went down to his home village of Nankanga. Had Godfrey not had the chance to go to school he would be a fisherman in the village today and a rice farmer, barely eaking out an existence. And while he’d have the same heart and be the same person, he would never be starting schools for thousands of other kids in villages all across this country today.