



I missed out on more than goat meat ...
Steve Vinton, November 12, 2007

The flight across the ocean to Europe on my way back to Africa is a long one, and this flight seems significantly longer than most. I have this incredible desire to just be home at Madisi. It's been nearly four weeks since I've seen Susan. I'm sure Josh has gotten a lot better in chess and I know he's ready to try to beat me once I get back. And Jonathan, well my face is smiling and I'm laughing just thinking of him.

I've been sitting here on the plane enjoying myself reading through all of the emails that I got from Tanzania while I've been here in America these past couple of weeks. Susan's brief but to-the-point email about Jonathan is one I for sure won't erase: "Today, Yusto and Yona pitched the football back and forth and then went to the forest to pick a certain berry that people use here to make a durable glue. Of course, given it was dark they did it in the bathroom sink and yup, the glue is durable, the sink is plugged! Hurry home love. He's definitely your son!" Of course then there's the message from Jonathan himself that I also have to save: "Dear dad, I hope you don't become worried about this question but I was wondering if you could tell me the price of a Toshiba computer charger. Don't ask why but please respond. Thanks Love Jonathan P.S Its for a good cause. Unless you want a sad Josh. His computer charger blew up. I will work to pay for it. I love you and tell everybody I know hi." And that's Jonathan, our own little Calvin of "Calvin and Hobbes" fame. He certainly does get himself in a ton of trouble but he does have a heart of gold. I can see Joshua in tears over his computer charger and Jonathan deciding to work to get him a new one.

I read through Emmanuel's emails and I can feel his excitement over the success of trucking all of the metal roofing down to the new schools at Malindindo, Ulolela and Mpepo before the rains made the roads impassable, and I can also feel his joy talking about his son Christian. I really like it that he calls me Christian's grandfather.

It's not just the sheer volume of Godfrey's emails that gives me joy, it's the playful joking around that the "wireless" works between our brains even if we're on different continents and it's reading of all that the gang has gotten done in three short weeks and especially the way he writes of it all. One day he is taking the District Commissioner on a tour of the land where we are beginning to build our college pointing where the buildings will be built and how the college will change people's lives, the next day he's in a private meeting with the Minister of the Interior, and then Godfrey's with Susan in the village visiting two of her sickest friends, both with horrible cancers. He sees Susan's face and knows that she wants somehow to get them down to the big cancer hospital in Dar, and then he's arranging it all with a couple of phone calls, he's get rides for them, taxis to meet them, people in this place and that place to help them, making sure they'll be treated like special people everywhere they go, it was vintage Godfrey doing all of those wonderful organizing things that he seems always to be so good at. And then writing to me that, yes, we must build schools, but it is also our call from God to intervene to do the unthinkable on behalf of those in the greatest of need. For after all, who in the village would ever imagine that Jerome and Julius would ever one day get to

Dar es Salaam let alone get to a hospital there and get treatment and have maybe their lives saved. "It is our calling Mzee." Indeed it is.

It is Susan's emails though that really thrill me.

To read about how once the exam results were known the District Commissioner came with her entourage to visit the school in the little village of Igoda where the kids beat out all of the students in all of the government schools in the entire district. And even spent the night! She and all of her entourage! I had to chuckle at Susan wondering how in the world she was going to get any meat so she wouldn't have to serve the DC rice and beans and wanting to kill another one of our goats! I could see in my mind the District Commissioner staying in our home with Susan and then the two of them cooking pancakes in the morning together in the kitchen. That's my wife! The wonderful dinner for all of the dignitaries one moment, complete with all of the speeches and the normal pomp and circumstance, and then the next it's just Susan, Sarah and Pauline alone with the District Commissioner, the four women enjoying the evening together in our home, and then Susan and the District Commissioner getting up in the morning to talk about being professional women and raising kids all the while cooking pancakes together!

What the government officials explained very clearly was that everyone is marveling over the results because it would have been a victory even if our school had placed dead last in the whole district! Because the government schools take the cream of the cream, the A students. And we take all of the other kids, everyone who isn't chosen, the kids who have no shoes, and increasingly, the kids who have no parents. And so, as the government official who gave the speech remarked, truly even had we placed last it would have been a victory anyway. To have ranked somewhere in the middle would have been a miracle. But to have come out on top of every single government school in the district was something that no

one would have ever dreamed possible. Madisi is, as the District Commissioner said, a school that everyone, even the President, should see.

The conversation turned to all of the people in the villages who had AIDS, and Susan true to form afraid that the District Medical Officer who was there in the entourage would be angry with her because she's not a doctor and doesn't have any real medical training, and so Susan's explaining to them that it all started without any plan but simply because she's a mother and she just wanted to help other mothers, and that because she is a Christian it just wasn't possible to only teach and to not do whatever she could to help all of those who needed help. Let me share part of Susan's email with you all ...

She said that she as the District Commissioner really had no idea what was going on up here. She said that her file gave no indication of the reality. (As Sarah said to me afterwards, better to be found doing more rather than less than what the paper reports say!) We actually had a great time with her especially in the evening when it was Pauline, Sarah and me. She has three children - one Josh's age, one Jonathan's age and one seven years old. She asked me in front of all of her entourage why we do this since obviously it isn't about money. So I told her all about our call from God in front of them all (one who I think is a Muslim). And I said what I truly believe, that we who are Christians need to be the first to take care of this problem of kids not even getting a chance to go to school, that we must help the poor and the needy, that it is a part of our very being as Christians, and that it is pleasing to God. I told her that we have so many wonderful Tanzanians who have joined us here in these villages, accepting to live with those who are poor and to make themselves to be poor together with them, and to give of themselves for a year or two to do something to help those who otherwise would never go to school. Money to make our church buildings prettier is not pleasing to God, but helping kids in these villages is! I think that she was both surprised and pleased by that!"

Wow! What a wife I've got! I'll close by letting you read the introductory paragraphs to the official report that Susan, Godfrey and Sarah put together a couple of days later after District

Commissioner's visit because she insisted that they send her all of the facts and figures in writing so she would have something for the official government files.

It wasn't until we started getting to know our students and their families in the Mufindi District that we realized HIV/AIDS was growing to be such a problem that it was preventing many children from ever getting such an education. None of us are trained medical workers. But we are mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers who love our neighbors as if they were our own family. When we started realizing both the extent of the problem and the quality of medical services that were available locally, we knew that we could not just sit back quietly and let our friends and neighbors die. So, we do what we can to connect people with the services that exist and get parents back on their feet so that they can raise their own children.

It all began when one of our students introduced one of our teachers to her mother and youngest sister, who were sick. Through building a relationship with them and then with other children in the area, we discovered that HIV was the cause of their continual and recurring illnesses. While we lost some very dear friends in the beginning when we were just starting to figure out what was going on around us, we gained confidence as we watched others receiving ARV treatment get their health back, go back to their farms, and return to life as normal.

VST has never had an official HIV/AIDS program

and we have never made any effort to seek out patients, but we have operated on three key principles from the beginning. First, our students have been involved in every aspect, because our hope is not just to help people in their immediate circumstances, but also to raise up a generation of leaders who care about their neighbors and will become doctors and nurses and citizens that will care for and contribute to their society. We want the discussions we have with our students to be the springboard for many more conversations in their villages, homes, and other social circles. Second, everything we do centers around home visits and getting to know each individual receiving assistance. This is both because we never want our friends and neighbors to be seen as statistics on a piece of paper and also because we want to be able to base the help we provide on the true needs of the individual and not just to bits and pieces of information we would receive otherwise. Finally, the services provided change as we learn and grow. Initially, teachers and students visited people they knew and helped as they were able, but we have had to become more organized as the number of people receiving help has increased from a handful to well over 500 households ...

Truly I missed out on more than goat meat by being here in the United States these past few weeks.

I would have loved to have been there when those words came out of Susan's mouth in front of them all: "We who are Christians need to be the first ones ..."