

## **Engaging Globally Bethlehem Maternity Shelter, Zambia**

**By Debbie Black**

Chikuni Mission is a small rural community in southern Zambia. The local hospital, run by the Sisters of Charity, services a 579 square mile region (1,500 square kilometers) with a population of 20,000 residents. Families living in this area are predominantly poor, and transportation to Chikuni Mission Hospital is largely unavailable or unaffordable due to the distance. For this reason, expectant women who desire a hospital delivery often must walk up to 15 miles along rugged dirt roads to reach the hospital. If they arrive and are not ready to give birth, they must sleep outside.

Rather than risk the long journey, many women choose to deliver their babies at home. Complications experienced during home births have resulted in a high rate of infant mortality. The maternal mortality rate is also high, often the result of bleeding that cannot be controlled.

### **A Solution**

In late 2018, Chikuni Mission Hospital Administrator Sister Vivien Chanda contacted Cal Ihler, co-founder of Seattle University Professionals Without Borders (PWOB), to request sponsorship and assistance with construction of a maternity shelter. It would be located near Chikuni Mission Hospital and allow women to travel earlier in their pregnancy and stay until labor begins, at which time they can be admitted.

The maternity shelter became the designated “fund a project” event at PWOB’s annual auction in February 2019. Through the generosity of many committed supporters, \$21,045 was raised, including \$5,000 in matching funds provided by an anonymous donor. This will cover the cost of the shelter’s construction as well as needed furnishings and supplies, like beds and linens.

### **Project Assessment Trip**

In August 2019, I traveled to Chikuni Mission together with Ihler and fellow PWOB Board member Mike Mullen, Seattle U Facilities staff Byron Lynch and Mark Murray, and Seattle U supporter Terrina Marchant, to participate in the project’s next step, site assessment. Hospital administrators were considering four potential sites for the maternity shelter and had requested PWOB’s consultation and advice. We were also looking to clarify the project scope through in-person conversations with hospital administrators and to identify and recommend local contractors for the administrators to interview. Once commenced, the project would be driven by the hospital with PWOB’s assistance if requested by the hired contractor or hospital officials.

PWOB typically works in partnership with an organization and local community members. Our volunteers assist and educate where possible to support self-reliance. Respect for the local culture and building strong, long-term relationships is at the heart of our work. For this reason, our volunteers return to the same communities year after year. There is no “one and done!”



Byron, Mark, Debbie --- DEPARTING SEATAC --- Cal, Mike, Terrina

### It's a Long Way to Chikuni!

My first time to Africa, I learned that getting to Chikuni Mission is an arduous journey! Our route included a 14.5-hour nonstop flight from Seattle to Dubai, followed by a seven-hour flight to Lusaka, Zambia's capital city. From there it's a four-hour drive to Chikuni on mostly unpaved roads.

Each of us carried an extra suitcase full of donated medical supplies, including a defibrillator, IVs, dressings, scrubs, gloves and other much needed items. Chikuni Mission Hospital receives government funding but is also dependent upon charitable donations to provide patient care.

O'Brien, our hired driver, managed to pack the six of us and 12 suitcases into his minibus.



O'Brien & Cal – grateful everything fit!



12 Suitcases, 6 Passengers, One Driver

Southern Zambia was experiencing a drought and the drive to Chikuni was dry and dusty. Crops had failed and many people were experiencing hunger at this time.





Dusty road en route to Chikuni Mission



Roadside Carrot Merchant

### The Mission

It was late afternoon when we finally arrived in Chikuni. In addition to the hospital, the rural mission comprises a boys' and a girls' high school, a grammar school, a radio station, a Jesuit rectory, convents for the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of the Holy Spirit, and the Mukanzubo Kalinda Institute. Mukanzubo is a cultural and research institute founded by the Zambia-Malawi Province of the Society of Jesus to preserve the tradition, language and culture of the Tonga people. We rented rooms in the institute's guest house.



At Mukanzubo we were greeted by Mable Chombe. Mable cooks for the girls who board at the Institute while being educated about their people's cultural traditions. Her mother-in-law, Yvonne Ndaba, runs the institute. Yvonne is extremely knowledgeable about Tongan history and culture and shared this with us during our stay. We were even treated to an evening of Tongan dance performed by students in traditional costume.



Traditional Tongan art in Mukanzubo Kalinda Institute



Mukanzubo students perform Tongan dance



Longtime PWOB partner Bert Otten, S.J., came to say hello the evening of our arrival. Fr. Bert is a Seattle U Emeritus Professor of Engineering and has been living in Chikuni since 2005. He is involved with many service projects and educational and pastoral activities in the area. He also serves on the hospital's board of directors.



Bert Otten, S.J., stops by Muzanzubo to say hello

Settling-in at the Mukanzubo guest house, I immediately missed some of the luxuries we take for granted at home, like running water. The showers were not connected to a water source and required some work by the professional plumbers in our group. Fr. Bert told us there would be rolling blackouts throughout the day due to the drought conditions, and we could only connect to the Internet when standing in a specific spot in front of Mukanzubo. In addition, I'd seen two of the biggest spiders I'd ever laid eyes on – inside the guest house!



African Spider!

### **Hospital and Shelter Visits**

After a day to rest and adjust to our surroundings, Sr. Vivien invited us to attend her morning staff meeting at Chikuni Mission Hospital and introduce ourselves. Three medical licentiates, the equivalent of a Physician's Assistant in the U.S., one doctor, a general practitioner, and a full nursing staff provide medical services to patients in the 98-bed facility, including pediatric care, OB/Gyn, adult inpatient care

and general surgical procedures. At this meeting I met Nancy Mwiinga, a good-natured young OB nurse, who would become my electronic pen pal when I returned to Seattle.



Morning staff meeting at Chikuni Hospital



Nurse Nancy and me

Following round-robin updates, the staff ended the meeting with a beautiful, inspirational song in the Tongan language led by nurse Nancy. We then delivered the donated medical supplies, which the staff was grateful to receive.



Delivering donated medical supplies from Seattle to Chikuni Hospital

That afternoon, Sr. Vivien drove several of us to see the hospital's existing maternity shelter. This was a surprise -- we were unaware of an existing shelter. It didn't take long, however, to understand the need for a new accommodation. The shelter is a few miles from the hospital on rough dirt roads – still too far a distance for a laboring woman to walk.



Eight women occupied the dimly lit dwelling, some looked to be in their teens. A small window in one of the primitive cement walls allowed a bit of sunlight in, and a single light bulb suspended from the ceiling provided the sole source of artificial light. Each of the women had a

metal frame bed except for one who rested on a mat on the cement floor. An ablution block behind the shelter housed a couple of toilets and sinks, though it wasn't clear if there was a functional water source.



Sister Vivien and expectant mothers at Chikuni's current maternity shelter

We talked with the expectant mothers. It was the second or third pregnancy for most, and they were looking forward to their new arrivals. A female family member must accompany each mother to the shelter to care and provide food for them. Family members sleep and cook under a nearby outdoor shelter. When labor starts, the relative will walk with the mother to the hospital.

#### Expectant Moms





Relatives of expectant mothers in outdoor shelter. They sleep and cook for the mothers-to-be here.



**Assessment and Recommendation**

We toured the building sites and found that each had a challenge to be overcome, from the need to persuade the Jesuit order that owned one parcel of land to donate it to the hospital, to water



accessibility, to co-location with the hospital's open incinerator! We considered the pros and cons of each site and discussed them with Fr. Bert and hospital officials. Our recommendation from a health and safety perspective was for the parcel that would have to be donated, though it was not the nearest to the hospital. The decision, of course, belonged to hospital officials.

We also identified and referred two contractors to Sr. Vivien for interviews. PWOB had worked with one of the men on a previous project. The other had strong referrals.

### **Home Again**

We returned to Seattle with a clear sense of the need for a new maternity shelter in Chikuni, a better understanding of the project scope, and having achieved our mission to assess the building sites and make our recommendation. We left Sr. Vivien enough of the funds raised to begin construction once a contractor was hired. The rhythm of Zambian life is vastly different from that of American life, however. Things get done in their own time when the manpower and supplies are available. We didn't know how soon the project would begin but looked forward to news of progress.

Meeting our partners, the hospital staff, Yvonne and Mable at Mukanzubo, and the nuns who serve the community, was my favorite part of the trip. All were full of joy, welcoming and happy to share what they had. The need that I saw at the hospital sticks in my mind. Hospital staff do their best to care for and educate patients using the tools they have, but essential equipment is lacking. The hospital's only X-ray machine, for example, was inoperable. It was a very eye-opening experience and left me wanting to help in whatever way I can.



Yvonne and m in Mukanzubo garden

### **Update: April 2020**

Fr. Bert emailed in April with news of progress on the maternity shelter and photos. Hospital officials chose a site next-door to the hospital, making it easy for expectant mothers to walk to the delivery room. The shelter is expected to be completed during the summer of 2020. It will include two toilets,

two showers, a kitchen, and a small pantry. At the request of the anonymous donor who provided a generous gift, it will be named **Bethlehem Maternity Shelter**.



**The new Bethlehem Maternity Shelter in progress**



PWOB hopes to return to Chikuni Mission in June 2021.





**Professionals Without Borders (PWOB)** is an international service club grown out of Seattle University Facilities Services that has enlivened the university's commitment to global engagement for more than a decade. By returning annually to Zambia, Belize and Nicaragua to make needed infrastructure improvements in partnership with local community members, PWOB has built strong relationships and provided service-learning opportunities for Seattle U students, faculty and staff.