Smiles, Service and Sustainability

More than 9,200 miles across the globe, it was hard not to notice the bloated stomachs, peeling skin, swollen cheeks and boney spines of the people surrounding them. Kaitlyn True and Steven Ebeling could feel the hunger consuming these people. They eat, but they are still hungry.

Coming from a third-world nation, these people are hungry for a wholesome, nutritious diet. Digging deeper, they are hungry for something much more – for knowledge and an understanding.

Kaitlyn True and Steven Ebeling, both animal science majors with a meat science business option from Plainview, Texas, knew they were destined to help the people of Malawi, Africa.

They spent two months in the summer of 2012 teaching and serving these people on an internship with Circle of Hope International.

"Malawians eat one thing all the time," True said. "They don't consider it a meal if they have not had nsima. Nsima is their complete and total staple food."

Nsima (see-ma) is made from a white corn variety grown in Africa. The Malawians dry the corn out, shell it and pound it into flour. Then they add the flour to boiling water and stir until it is completely thick. Once cooked, they form the nsima into patties and poke a hole in the middle to form a scoop.

"They use their hands to scoop up relish, a form of greens, with the nsima because most people can't afford to have silverware," True said.

In addition to nsima, the Malawians get their major source of protein from mice, fish and peanuts, when they are lucky. They lack the monetary and physical resources to eat much else.

"We sit down to a feast every day," Ebeling said. "But when you see a five-year-old kid that only gets to eat two times a week and he has to walk eight miles to get it, it puts everything into perspective."

The lack of protein and viable iron left an impression on the animal science duo, and they said they knew the deficiency was causing bigger problems. The Malawian's scarce diet is contributing heavily to their anemia epidemic.

To aid in the epidemic, True and Ebeling conducted educational projects to ensure the community can become more sustainable and gain food security.

True performed formative research to plan for a feeding trial in which women and children will be given three ounces of goat meat five days a week. She worked to identify groups of anemic Malawian women and children. The hypothesis is that by providing a bio-available source of iron and protein, their cognitive development and language skills will improve at a higher rate.

"This is a yearlong project that will begin in 2013," True said. "We plan to conduct hemoglobin and cognitive tests three times a year."

Steven educated the local villagers how to properly care for their animals. Most of his days involved observing and telling the goat herders what they could do to improve their herd's health and well-being.

The knowledge provided to the goat herders is essential for the long-term sustainability of the two projects. Ebeling said their hope is to eventually increase the herd's population to meet the demands of the local red meat needs.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAITLYN TRUE

Although providing the Malawians with solutions and resources to their problems was important, providing development was essential.

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"Aid is only temporary and doesn't help a community in the long run, especially with starvation like this," Ebeling said. "There needs to be development so it can be sustainable, where they truly learn and understand."

Ultimately, education played a huge role in the progress of both projects. Ebeling said the Malawians have very limited access to formal educaiton.

"You had to talk to them in a very clear and concise manner so they could understand," Ebeling said. "But on a spiritual level, they wanted to learn, they were hungry for knowledge."

No matter what True was doing, she had someone from the village by her side learning how to conduct all of the tests. Ebeling was constantly speaking with the village's men and boys about animal health and agriculture. They said there was rarely a moment they were left alone. The Malawians were dedicated to learning anything and everything possible.

Aside from the language barrier and cultural differences, True and Ebeling were faced with even greater difficulty. Ebeling said it was challenging for the Malawians to understand certain concepts because they were entirely unfamiliar.

"If they couldn't see something, it was hard for them to believe it," Ebeling said. "Often times we would grab a stick and draw something in the dirt just to show them how things worked."

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Agriculture is the foundation of the Malawian culture. True said agriculture is the way they live. Their chickens live on their front porches and their goats roam around their houses.

When True was at the village preschool teaching, she said she would use the children's knowledge of agriculture to enhance their understanding.

"If I wanted to explain how something worked," True said, "I put it in a farm analogy because that was the easiest way for them to understand."

At times, teaching the Malawians about nutrition, animals and research was difficult because they just could not understand. But through all of their confusion, they remained determined to learn.

True said there was one young man that left a lasting impression on her. January is a 27- year-old man that is married and has two children. January was fortunate to finish high school and worked as a translator for True and their team in Malawi.

In the village they were visiting, there is a Grace Center that contains a library filled with books donated by people in America. True said January was excited when they arrived because he knew their presence was his opportunity to learn.

"He would go into the library and read at night by flashlight since there wasn't electricity, with very expensive batteries that he paid for," True said. "Batteries are about five times the cost there than they are in America, and a lucky Malawian makes 50 cents a day."

January would read with his flash light and write down the page numbers of any word he did not understand. True said he would visit her the next day with a large stack of books.

"He would say to me, 'I don't understand this, this or this, can you teach me?' It was really humbling to see someone work so hard," True said. "He graduated high school, but he still wanted to learn so much more."

Even though True and Ebeling were in Malawi to help provide a more promising future, it was a learning experience for them, too.

Pastor Ernest Phiri, the Circle of Hope Director in Malawi, said Malawians are very desirous of being joyful, hospitable and helpful to others, even when their bodies are weak.

"Another part of our culture is if you were to come and visit us, even if you arrive at a home with no food," Phiri said, "they will do everything they can to find even a little something they could offer you when you came to their home."

The longer True and Ebeling were there and more immersed into the Malawian culture, the people helped them appreciate the little things in life, blessings and their education.

"They are the sweetest, most genuine people I have ever met," True said, as her eyes filled with tears. "They have nothing, not even food to eat every day, yet they are willing to give you everything."

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