

## Starfish Malawi

In 2014, we attended a fund-raising event for the charity we have become involved with, Starfish Malawi. We reconnected with some wonderful, dedicated teachers, both English and Malawian; with the charity founder Chris Knott – typically on the run between engagements, he never stops!- and I believe we made some new friends along the way.

Almost the first thing we did that evening was that we bumped into one of the most pro-active women I have ever been privileged to meet while involved with Starfish Malawi, a head teacher who has pulled a little country school out of the doldrums into one of the most successful places of learning in Kent, and probably the whole of the South of England - and by the sounds of it, she is doing the same for the school and village in Malawi that they are linked with. She was overflowing with enthusiasm for the health projects for women that she is very involved with ( I will never forget her face when she was told that most of the girls had no underwear, and were therefore unable to attend school for several days every month); for the building work that they had sponsored for “ their” school in Malawi, for the throne of a chair they had procured for the head teacher.... then she stopped. Her daughter had been standing by her side listening to her in silence, and she turned to her when we asked what were her plans for the future. It was announced joyfully that she had won a place at Cambridge University to study Music (this was a girl who had had major learning difficulties in the past), and we were told that it was all due to Roly's offering to help, and subsequently encouraging her with the creative process of writing, playing and singing her own songs. The tangible result of which was a CD which she achieved in our recording studio 2 years ago. He is always so willing to give people a hand, and it was thrilling to see the transformation in the life of one young woman. He has that effect on all his music pupils!

We took our seats for dinner, and were introduced to the speaker for the evening. His name was Henry Olonga; a young cricketer who had demonstrated his revulsion for the leadership in Zimbabwe by wearing a black armband on the cricket pitch during the World Cup of 2003. He received death threats after this, and was unable to return to Zimbabwe. A man of courage! You meet some wonderful, passionate people as you travel through this world, and we have certainly done so since our involvement with Starfish Malawi. It turned out that as we told Henry the story about the making of our Starfish CD we found that we had something other than our Christianity in common.

Perhaps I had better go back to the beginning of the Starfish Story (Roly and Rosie's version). Way back in 2009. Roly and I were invited to Sandhurst Baptist Church to sing and play at a Lunch Club that they hosted once a month. After the gig they feed you royally, and as we sat there munching, I turned to Roly with one of my bright ideas – they just fall out of my mouth, usually, and we then have to pick up the pieces!- and I uttered these immortal words. “I'm sure we could write them a song for the Starfish Charity, couldn't we Roly??”; and as he reminds me from time to time (no, quite frequently actually) that kissed off the next three years of our life! Roly wrote a marvellous song to illustrate Loren Eisler's story, and then put some inspired music to back it up, and then I sang a vocal. That was the easy bit, it turned out. We then decided to put some children singing in the background; children from the English schools involved with the Charity, who were linked with schools in Malawi - and some Malawi schools as well! So it was that Roly and I found ourselves on a plane heading to the “warm heart of Africa”, as the country of Malawi is known as, thanks to the generosity and vision of the charity's founder, Chris Knott. This extraordinary man had been a millionaire Insurance Company owner, who was taken to Malawi; and the trip was to completely turn his life around. A little crippled girl crawled across the floor towards him with a dazzling smile – he burst into tears to hear that she was an AIDS orphan, and determined to do something to help. This meant going home, and giving up his incredibly successful business, and devoting himself totally to improving the lot of as many children in Malawi as he was able to. He

started getting the local schools in the area enthused with a schools linking scheme, and by the time we caught up with him there were over a hundred schools on board, in Malawi and in England sharing the Starfish vision of making a difference – even if it only meant throwing one stranded starfish at a time back into the sea, it was worth doing. Starfish Malawi has grown into a tremendous vehicle for sharing knowledge, resources, and most importantly, the love of JESUS with many many children. We were honoured to be on board!

We too had a life-changing experience in visiting this place. I had never been to a Third World country before; although you read about poverty, and watch harrowing images on the TV, nothing prepares you for the reality of people who live their lives in constant deprivation of what we take for granted; food, water, electricity and sanitation are not a given in Malawi. Far from it. And the AIDS epidemic is a brutal reality to the thousands of children who have lost parents, grand-parents and siblings to this disease. What an extraordinary surprise, therefore, to meet hundreds of children with only the clothes they stood up in, and no shoes on their feet, or underwear, who probably would only get one meal that day (provided by Starfish funds) at school, who greeted us with smiles and waves and joyful singing! Their happiness was a wonder to us, and we could not help but compare it with the bored, spoiled brats that are the norm to encounter in our green and pleasant land. Who want more and more THINGS, and are not satisfied – no wonder that Chris Knott and the teachers over here yearn to teach them how very fortunate they are, compared to the children of Malawi. What a lot we can learn from those who seem to possess so little, but are overflowing with gratitude!

We travelled from school to school, recording the wonderful voices of the children for the CD, lastly coming to Salima School, where we were taken to the Blind Wing, and introduced to our choir for the day. These children are considered the dregs of society here in Malawi. They have no potential in the minds of most for any useful purpose; they are condemned to a life of begging on the streets. But here at the school they are fed, clothed, and educated; and given hope for the future. We asked them to warm up by singing one of their own songs, and thus we were rendered speechless with tears, and the second track on the CD was born. These children had the most wonderful voices, and they sang their hearts out for us. We were captivated by them all, as they then sung the Starfish Song for us beautifully – they had rehearsed it, obviously, very intently. We were ready to go home with a great result for stage 2 – and then the Icelandic Volcano exploded! Day after day, we watched Sky News telling us that all aircraft were grounded for the foreseeable future. We were beginning to think we would be staying in Malawi for ever, instead of racing around the Kent schools recording them all singing too! And then, the whole lot had to be mixed, and produced....Roly was caving in under the strain of pulling it all together – it was going to take several miracles.....

Finally, the cloud of ash dispersed, and we were winging our way home – to what?? So much still needed to happen to make the Starfish Song a reality. Then God stepped in, again and again, it seemed to me. First, Roly's brother-in-law offered to do all the time-correcting to synchronise the scores of different schools recordings; a massive and exacting task which he undertook so generously; then my brother rang up, and said he'd like to help with the production!! My bro is a world-famous record producer, who had just been awarded a CBE by Her Majesty the Queen – he did not get involved with 1) Family 2) Christians or 3) Blind People (being blind himself and a fabulous achiever he doesn't sit easy in the dependency zone). That's THREE miracles in one, then! He took on the project, and very quickly got a wonderful result. He made me sound pretty good, and all the children sounded AMAZING !! Then Roly's daughter Cathy, the graphic Whiz kid of the family, produced the stunning artwork for the package. Roly found a terrific company to produce the CDs for us. We had the finished articles in time to distribute them around the schools before the end of the summer term when so many of the kids involved would be leaving primary education (500 road miles, sick dog who insisted on coming, pork pies and coffee for breakfast on the move) ... job done!! Phew!

We continued to visit the UK schools for a couple of years, to deliver assemblies based on our Malawi experiences as part of the schools-linking project. We had a lot to share about the huge

cultural differences and difficulties in that part of Africa; and of course, there was the Starfish song to share with them all! We had a wonderful time with them all; inspiring teachers and great kids.....

Back to the dinner....

We had done our homework on Henry Olonga (Thanks Wikipedia!) before meeting him that night, and had discovered he had started a computer sounds business as his "tent-making", but also sang a bit; notably a song of exile about Zimbabwe and his love for his country, which had achieved some commercial success. So I suppose I should not have been surprised when telling him about the saga of the CD and its famous producer, at his exclamation of disbelief, nay shock, when I airily announced that Robin Millar CBE was my brother! It turned out that Henry was a great admirer of his, and had actually been to Robin's recording studio in Whitfield Street, London, before it was forced to fold, as were so many independent outfits, by the big boys of the record industry. In fact Robin was going to record Henry, but sadly it never happened. What a small world, nonetheless! We had his attention from then on in, and spent a fascinating evening discussing the perils of rock n roll, and I told Henry how I had come to be rescued, healed and delivered from my old ways to a new Life with the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour. Roly had many things to share about his experience as a Christian muso, and I hope we blessed the man as well as scaring him to death! He recovered sufficiently to tell his life story, or part of it anyway to the dinner guests; and his rendition of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was very sweet to me, as it had been one of my mother's favourite songs to sing us as a lullaby when we were children. Thank you Henry, and God bless you and yours in your new life in Australia.

If you visit our website, [millennium3music.com](http://millennium3music.com), you can listen to the Starfish Song, and the track that the children from the Salima Visually Impaired School that reduced us all to tears.