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Into the Warm Heart of Africa I Went

I am an American citizen and because of an increasingly xenophobic America, I was under the impression that I was safest within the confines of my own country. I thought my presence would be unwanted in other places but in my travels, I found that to be the furthest thing from the truth. I felt welcomed and I felt included. I and my teammates were met with curiosity as opposed to fear. I have discovered that safety is not a place, but rather a feeling because of my experiences abroad in Malawi.

Before I left, my fear was not that I would be unaccepting of others, but instead that others would not be accepting of me. I have the privilege of being surrounded by people that look like me in America. I find comfort in blending in and in America, I blend in. I knew that familiar comfort would not be available in Malawi because I knew that my pale skin would stick out and I was right, it did. But, I was definitely wrong about one thing. I was wrong to fear that I would not be accepted because instead, I was welcomed into the homes of people whom I had just met with open arms.

During our time at Lake Malawi, another student, our two interpreters, and I had the privilege of spending a half day with a family at their home in Chembe Village. The family matriarch was Madame Ruth and upon meeting Madame Ruth, the other student and I were informed that Madame Ruth could only communicate nonverbally. Now, Madame Ruth was aware that the other student and I were coming and she was familiar with our interpreters as they were also from Chembe Village. Still, the fact remains that Madame Ruth showed no hesitation in inviting two complete strangers into her home and into her family. We cooked lunch, played

with her children, and joined in with the family during a friendly game of playing cards. At the end of our time together, Madame Ruth was playing cards along with us and as we departed from her home, she hugged us both.

It dawned on me soon after that Madame Ruth chose vulnerability, but she did not choose fear. Madame Ruth bravely opened herself, her family, and her home to two White strangers. Instead of fearful eyes, she graced us with inviting smiles and hand signals as she communicated with us in her own way. It hit me then that fear can be a choice rather than a reflex. In America, we tend to fear who or what we do not know, but it was there I realized that I did not want to be held captive by fear any longer. I now know that I don't have to be and that I can forgo fear because of the courage I saw and the inspiration I received from Madame Ruth alone.

Our mission in Malawi was to build relationships with those we met. A relationship forming between two people who do not speak the same language appears challenging and it is. But, an ability to speak is not what bonds us together as humans. In fact, there are people who do not possess the ability to speak like Madame Ruth. We mustn't rely on speech alone. My experiences in Malawi reminded me that there are indeed universal truths which bond us humans together. These truths are beliefs and feelings that surpass barriers whether they be cultural, language, or otherwise. I have Madame Ruth's young daughter, LaBecca, to thank for reminding me that showing kindness and caring for one another can exist without words. I spent time with LaBecca at her home in Chembe and LaBecca in all her fourth-grade glory knew quite a few clapping games. Enthralled by her clapping and feeling nostalgic for my own elementary school days of playing clapping games, I asked for LaBecca to teach me. LaBecca had a time teaching me as her skills were far sharper than mine because it had been a while for me, but our clapping games ultimately "broke the ice" between us. Once we finished our games, LaBecca didn't

retreat to her original seat by her aunt right away. In fact, she stayed by my side and sat right next to me, resting her forearm on my leg.

What came next was and is perhaps the most surreal moment of my life thus far. As LaBecca and I were sitting together, I became aware that I had sunscreen remnants all over my neck so I began dusting myself off with my hand. LaBecca looked on with intense scrutiny at first before she raised her hand up and began helping me. It was at that moment that my eyes connected with hers and I then looked on with scrutiny. LaBecca continued to help until I was free of any remnant. This young girl whom I had only just met cared for me with more genuineness than I have ever witnessed before. No words occurred during this exchange, but I knew in my heart that her and I had built a relationship with one another.

Expressing kindness and care for one another proved to be more important than our lack of a shared language and this lesson is one that I will always take with me. I have always heard that we as a human race are more alike than we are different, but I believed it in that moment I shared with LaBecca. Malawi opened my eyes not just to a new country, but to a new world. A world where I can choose to forgo fear because I have seen firsthand that fear is not our only choice. A world where kindness and caring surpass barriers. A world where I can feel safe because safety is a feeling we carry rather than a place we go.