

Africa. Every opportunity in life is a challenge by God. You can take the opportunity, not knowing exactly what to expect, or you can shy away from the unfamiliar. I may never know precisely why God sent me to Mozambique, but I know for a fact that this trip changed my life.

If I could choose one word to describe the people I met in Cambine, it would have to be resilient. On the ride from the airport to Cambine, it was clear that our presumptions about Africa were incorrect. Yes, there is suffering, but it's amazing to see how suffering is surpassed by truly living.

We drove along the single government-run paved road in Mozambique and then turned onto a dusty road that was extremely bumpy. That's when I knew we were in for the trip of a lifetime. We arrived in Cambine at sunset and we were introduced to Julio who helped translate for us throughout the week. On Sunday we attended our first church service in Cambine. Our cars were met by a group of people singing in unison and clapping. Their service was so joyful. I never could have imagined what God had in store for me but that celebration of God's love marked the beginning.

That day, Julio invited Erin and me to his home to play with his children: Telusa, Tanya and Claudia. At first I was hesitant because I've never really been crazy about kids, but we went. That was the best decision because Julio's children taught me more about myself than I've ever learned before. We started out playing UNO as they practiced their English on us. Every day after we finished sanding and painting we would venture to Julio's house to play. I hadn't played in a very long time, but those girls taught me how to live freely. We played "country game" which I had never played before, we tasted sugar cane, we played ridiculous amounts of UNO, but most of all we laughed. It's amazing how people from totally different countries and of different ages can have so much fun together. Our cultures are different, our languages are even different, but our hearts are the same.

Towards the middle of the week we visited the widows in Massinga. In Mozambique, when a woman's husband dies people assume she is a witch and she is abused within her community. Massinga serves as a refuge for the widows. When we arrived at the refuge, we were met by singing once more and each of the widows greeted us. We all prayed together, before the team passed out sweaters and wooden crosses to them. The widows immediately put the sweaters on, even though it was an extremely hot day. The best part was when they all put their hoods up and tied the strings in bows beneath their chins. They were so appreciative of the simplest gesture of kindness. The widows even asked Viktoria to pray for Sue and Rachel, even though they were unable to come on the trip because the ladies remembered them from the previous year. The most touching part was washing the widow's feet. Each time I looked at their feet, tough from years of hard work, and as I was washing their feet, I would look up, into

their eyes. Each of the widows smiled and spoke to me in Xitswa. Even though I was unable to speak to each of them, I believe we understood each other.

When we arrived at the orphanage in Cambine, a bunch of children were chasing a chicken and the rest were working or playing in the yard. We all played duck, duck, goose, and I started asking them their names. Communication wasn't exactly easy because of the language barrier but we quickly learned how to ask the children what their names were. One little girl, Maria, always came up to me and grabbed my hand, leading me off to play. We played group games, jumped rope, and even played soccer. It was beautiful to see how the children at the orphanage treated each other like a family, the older ones looking after the younger ones.

At the end of the week, when it was time to part from our new friends, it was ten times harder than I thought it would be. As we prepared to leave the whole experience suddenly felt surreal. I never thought I'd go to Africa, and I never expected to fall in love with the country. I couldn't hold in all the emotions, and as we drove away, I told myself this wouldn't be my first and last trip to Mozambique. I decided that I was going back next year. As incredible as it may seem, I believe that God needs me there, so I'm going to go.

Since we arrived back in the United States, I fully realize how much I take for granted and how much I miss working within my community. I decided to start volunteering at CHAT (Church Hill Activities and Tutoring). Church Hill is an impoverished area of Richmond, and I think God is calling me to start making a difference here in Richmond and abroad. Our mission in Mozambique opened my eyes to not only the suffering there but within my own community as well. The people of Cambine helped me realize the things that truly matter in life. I realize that I don't need television or even the internet to entertain myself. I don't have to straighten my hair every day, and I can find friends anywhere if I just remain open to new ideas. Now I'm thinking more about my future and where I should be in the next few years. I still see myself as a writer, but I want to work abroad bringing to light the stories of people that often go unnoticed.

2 Corinthians 4:6-9

"The Scriptures say, "God commanded light to shine in the dark." Now God is shining in our hearts to let you know that his glory is seen in Jesus Christ. We are like clay jars in which this treasure is stored. The real power comes from God and not from us. We often suffer, but we are never crushed.

Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again."