

The Malawi Nursing Exchange: Changing Lives



Photo credit Melodie Hicks

In all my life, no experience has transformed me, both professionally and personally, like my first trip to Malawi did. When I volunteered to sit on a steering committee over 10 years ago, little did I know that I would end up where I am today. It was in January 2008 when a small group of Vanier students and teachers from a variety of disciplines travelled to Malawi to study HIV/AIDS as a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)-funded, public engagement project. Shortly after our arrival in the small rural village of Makupo, it became clear to me that there were overwhelming needs for health information and access to quality health care as well as an abundance of incredible learning opportunities for students. I was both humbled and horrified on that first trip. The reality of such abject poverty enraged me, and it motivated me to get a sustained exchange program going at Vanier.

Over the years since its establishment in 2010, more than 60 students have participated in the Malawi Nursing Exchange. The opportunity to share my passion for global health, sustainable development and ethical engagement abroad continues to drive me each year. Vanier students have carried over \$200,000 worth of life-saving medications, employed an entire village for 8 years, and provided thousands of hours of free health care. I am very proud of the young people who have studied abroad with me; they continue to inspire me, and I feel so privileged to be able to offer this learning opportunity to our students. When I look back over my teaching career, it is the exchange program that I am most proud of because it fosters tolerance and understanding and helps our graduating students to develop their intercultural competence, something that all nurses need to possess if they are to provide meaningful care to patients.

The Malawi Nursing Exchange Alumni continue to be involved, supporting our fundraising efforts and attending our annual reunion at Mont Tremblant. They mentor the new participants and look out for one another in our Montreal area hospitals. For this article, I reached out to former students and asked a single, simple question: ***How has your participation in the Malawi Nursing Exchange Program impacted your life?*** Here are some of their responses.

[The exchange] enabled me to grow, to learn, and to be part of a team that no textbook or lecture could ever replace.

"I participated in the Malawi nursing exchange 5 years ago. The insight that I acquired during those six weeks, in no exaggeration, remains with me as equally in my daily nursing practice as it does in my daily encounters. The experience not only taught me how to recognize cultural differences and adapt to them, but how to APPRECIATE them. It enabled me to grow, to learn, and to be part of a team that no textbook or lecture could ever replace. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to have learned so many valuable lessons that have enriched my ability to care for others. At the end of the day, there are truly no words strong enough to describe how 6 weeks altered not only my perception of the world, but how I choose to contribute to it."

—Chrissy Mitchell (MNE 2013 and Alumni Trip 2016). Chrissy obtained her Bachelor's degree in Nursing from McGill University in 2015. She is currently pursuing a Master's in Nursing at Ottawa University. She teaches part-time in the Vanier Nursing program and works in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at St. Mary's Hospital.

“Before going to Malawi, I had preconceived notions of what nursing in a “developing country” would be like. Being in Malawi has not only made me a more versatile and competent healthcare professional, but on a personal level, it has grown in me a deep appreciation for other cultures here in Montreal and made me more understanding of the stories they have to tell.”

—Sarah Salzani (MNE 2018). Sarah is in her first year of the Bachelor of Nursing (Integrated) (BNI) program at McGill University.

“Originally from Brooklyn New York, an individual in my position could only dream of participating in a program that sends students thousands of miles away from home. Luckily, I was one of the few selected to partake in this adventure. From the moment I stepped off the plane, I knew this experience would positively influence my life. The breathtaking beauty of the country and its people welcomed each of us with open arms. Being the only person of African descent in my group, when alone in Malawi, I played the role of a chameleon, blending in with the people around me despite my “pro athlete frame.” It was a new feeling to be a part of the visible majority, however it was not an unnatural feeling. This exchange allowed me to experience firsthand how my life might have been different had my mother never decided to take a chance and move to the United States. I immediately developed much appreciation for my Malawian student peers who not only had to deal with demanding school tasks but also life. From having to do their laundry every weekend by hand to dealing with frequent power outages and poor internet connections and completing their school work... All of which we North Americans take for granted every day. Despite this, every student that I met at Kumuzu College was more than capable of dealing with these issues. Their lives seemed much less stressful than ours; they were always smiling and never complaining about any of the issues I just mentioned. Yes, this is a generalization and Malawi does have its fair share of demanding issues, but it is their resilience that I have come to admire and take back with me after my visit. It is that resilience that I have used to guide myself through life’s obstacles, and I undoubtedly believe it will continue to help me obtain my life goals.”

—Duchelin Joseph (MNE 2012). Duchelin graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Saint Xavier University in 2018. He is currently working at the Montreal Neurological Institute and is teaching part-time in the Vanier Nursing Program.

“The Malawi Nursing Exchange and three trips since: you can definitely say that the experience of nursing in Malawi has played a huge role in who I am today. I was able to discover my passion for global health and my dream to one day pursue it as a career. These trips have allowed me to grow not only as a nurse but as a person too. They have challenged me and shaped me in ways that no other opportunity has. The MNE has taught me to always keep an open mind and has changed my perspective on life. It has kept me humble and reminds me daily to be grateful. It has given me life-long friends and unforgettable memories. A piece of me will always belong to Malawi.”

—Laura Heather (MNE 2015). Laura completed her Bachelor degree in Nursing at McGill University in 2017. She has travelled to Malawi several times since, with the 2016 Alumni trip, in 2017 with the McGill Ambassador Program, and in 2018, she accompanied the MNE2018 to offer mentorship. She is currently working in General Surgery at St Mary’s Hospital.

“In addition to providing me with an excellent training opportunity, the Malawi Nursing Exchange program has had a profound impact on my life. My 7-week experience in Malawi in 2015 and my return in 2016 showed me how, even with few resources, our efforts can have a significant impact on the delivery of nursing care and health education. I learned so much through my hands-on experience both in Makupo village and in remote villages during our mobile clinics. The exposure to the cultural nuances of the people in Malawi, interacting with nursing staff, team members, and patients, was an enriching experience for me. I feel privileged to have been part of it and continue to feel a deep connection to the people of Malawi - who I now view as an extended family.”

—Emélie Elkrief (MNE 2015 and Alumni trip 2016). Emelie has worked as a neonatal intensive care nurse at the Jewish General Hospital and is now at McGill pursuing her Bachelor’s degree in Nursing.

“Being part of the Malawi Nursing Exchange Program has pushed me to expand my worldview. It has kick-started my curiosity towards understanding the realities of individuals of different backgrounds, whether it be cultural, social, or economical. My experience there has given me the motivation and drive to be a better nurse and person overall. I believe that the experience has instilled positivity and confidence in me, and it has taught me that I can make a real change, here and abroad. I am forever grateful to have been a part of this program; it has definitely played a part in shaping me into the individual I am today.”

—Cristine Mae Ramolette (MNE 2016). Cristine graduated from McGill University in 2018 with her Bachelor’s in Nursing and is currently working at St Mary’s Hospital in the Intensive Care Unit.



Photo credit Melodie Hicks

12 – VANIER ACADEMIC VOICES

“The Malawi Nursing Exchange Program has allowed me to broaden my horizons, to question my preconceived ideas, to open my eyes, and to learn. It solidified a foundation that as a young nursing professional I so deeply needed. Looking back, all my past achievements I owe in part to this experience. It allowed to understand my impact on others, it allowed me to question and listen, and finally it allowed me to make a difference.”

—Demetra Horotan (MNE 2012). Demetra graduated from McGill University with a Bachelor in Nursing in 2014. She now works at the Jewish General Hospital in the Emergency Department and has taught part-time for John Abbott, McGill, and Vanier in their Nursing programs. Demetra is currently completing her Nurse Practitioner Primary Care Program at McGill University.

“My participation in the exchange program had a great impact on my life. I had an opportunity to learn how nurses in Canada (Montreal and Quebec) provide care to patients and the patients’ perceptions and expectations towards the care they receive. This helped me gain knowledge, skills and an attitude towards the improvement of my nursing practice in Malawi. I also had an opportunity to learn about other cultures. This helped me to have confidence in the application of the transcultural theory of nursing, something I had learned about in Malawi but had not had the chance to apply or really understand in our settings.”

—Cynthia Mwachande (MNE 2017). Cynthia graduated in 2018 with a Bachelor in Nursing and Midwifery, Kamuzu College of Nursing, Malawi. She is currently working as the Head Nurse at the Chilanga Community Clinic, Malawi.

“The Malawi-Canada Nursing Exchange was a very helpful experience for me. I have learned that we need to work hard to succeed in life. For example, you Canadians are hard workers and punctual. I saw many people working in two places (companies) to make enough to sustain their living. People in Montreal never seem to tire easily and no one was just staying idle. On education, on the nursing side, I feel the approach used was good. The students were doing theory along with practicals, which was so easy to learn from since everything learned in class was fresh and easy to remember and put into practice. This is different from the approach used in nursing schools in Malawi, which start with theory then move on to practicals.

By the time students get to practice, they have forgotten the content. This requires that they have to do a lot of studying on their own. On lifestyle, Canadians eat healthy food (low fat, salt and sugar) and do fitness exercises like ice skating, etc. Canadians are also accountable and responsible citizens in keeping the environment tidy and clean by throwing their litter in refuse bins in public areas. My memories are still fresh, I miss Canada!”

—Eliza Mlolowa (MNE 2016). A mother of two, Eliza graduated from Kamuzu College of Nursing in 2017 with a Bachelor’s in Nursing and Midwifery. Eliza is currently awaiting placement in a government hospital.

My experience gave me a social responsibility to contest health inequalities and showed me opportunities to act against the injustices of our system.



Photo credit: Melodie Hicks



Photo credit Melodie Hicks

“The Malawi Nursing Exchange program helped me to understand nursing in a broader context. In addition, it helped me to understand the effects of different cultures on health. It was the experience of a lifetime.”

—Hellen Meke (MNE 2017 – 2018). Graduated from Kamuzu College of Nursing, Malawi with a Bachelor’s degree in Nursing and Midwifery.

“The Malawi Nursing Exchange Program was always something I wanted to be a part of. In my first year of nursing, I got excited hearing about the new developments in the village and hearing the experiences of the students when they got back and presented at the annual nursing conference. When it was my chance to go, I knew I had to make the most of it. I tried to soak up everything that Malawi had to offer. The people, the culture, and the friendships I made were unforgettable.”

This was a major milestone in my life and really taught me a lot about myself. It gave me the tools and strength to be a great nurse. I felt changed once I got back, in the best way possible. I felt more knowledgeable, stronger as a person, and more confident as a nurse. The experiences and hardships I went through stayed with me. Whenever I don’t feel confident enough or strong enough, I look back at what I was able to accomplish in Malawi and it gives me strength to continue. It has made me into the person and nurse that I am today, and I am forever grateful.”

—Michelle Samaha (MNE 2016). Michelle is currently pursuing her Bachelor’s at McGill while working in orthopedic trauma at the Montreal General Hospital. She is hoping to continue to do her Master’s and Nurse Practitioner program!

“I am one of the Malawi nursing students who was privileged to be part of exchange with Vanier College. This program gave me an opportunity to experience nursing in another setting; I was able to relate theory to practice. Some of the theory is not put in practice in our country as we are resource-limited. Above all, the programme changed my attitude towards nursing, it has been a success to my professional development. A lot of thanks to the coordinator, Melodie Hicks.”

—Maggie Phiri (MNE 2017). Maggie graduated from Kamuzu College of Nursing in 2018 with a Bachelor’s in Nursing and Midwifery.

“It’s been over 5 years since I had the chance to participate in the Malawi Nursing Exchange Program. This experience remains one of the most meaningful of my life. This internship was not only an enriching adventure, but it gave me a glimpse of understanding about complex global health issues, which still motivates me today. Since I had this opportunity, I continued to follow the path of public health through my higher education and career interests.”

Coming back from the internship, I started to question many things that I took for granted. I had many unanswered inquiries about the roots of gender inequality and health disparities between countries. I decided to pursue my graduate studies in public health, in the global health field, to have a better understanding of the health issues that I witnessed during my internship in Malawi.

The experience helped raise my awareness about different issues that I wasn’t aware of before going to Malawi. I experienced a culture shock when I arrived in Malawi, and this has enabled me to be empathetic with newcomers to Canada, understanding some of the challenges they are going through. Since then, I have had an interest in supporting and volunteering for local initiatives that promote migrant’s rights in Montreal.

Finally, through the unique journey that I’ve been part of, sometimes difficult and disturbing and at other times filled with humanity, my regard on social health inequalities has changed. My experience gave me a social responsibility to contest health inequalities and showed me opportunities to act against the injustices of our system.”

—Janie Plourde (MNE 2013). Janie graduated from Université de Montréal in 2016 with a Bachelor’s in Nursing. She pursued her Master’s degree in Public Health at École de santé publique de l’Université de Montréal and completed her final research project on rural population vaccination in India. Janie continues to volunteer for Medecin du Monde in Montreal, and she works part-time in the emergency department at the Jewish General Hospital.



Melodie Hicks
is a Nursing teacher.