

Mission: Zimbabwe

A Student-Organized Service Project

BY REBECCA PARSHALL

As a freshman officer during the 2006-2007 school year for Amnesty International's chapter at Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington, I watched in amazement as the club raised nearly \$15,000 for the Soma Home, a boarding school for girls born into the red light district of Kolkata, India. I could see that Amnesty's leaders and members took seriously Christ's call in Matthew 25:40, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sister of mind, you did for me" (TNIV).*

Later that spring, having been elected associate social vice president for the student body organization, The Associated Students of Walla Walla University (ASWWU), for the coming year, I began to plan with Contessa Mensink, the social VP, for the next year's activities. As we sought to build on the strengths of ASWWU, the largest club on campus, we both felt that something had been overlooked in the club's previous goals—an involvement in service, both local and global. Not knowing quite where to begin, we brainstormed about community projects, searched the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Website, and finally called Janelle Walikonis, the incoming WWU Amnesty International president, to tell her ASWWU would like to collaborate on her club's next fundraiser.

Finding the Right Project

During summer 2007, Contessa and I talked a number of times, but before we knew it, between orienting new students, beginning classes, and hosting our first social events, we were halfway through the fall quarter. Janelle kept us updated on her search, but we all felt frustrated at not being able to find exactly the right project. Then a school-wide e-mail from theol-

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ogy professor Pedrito Maynard-Reid captured her attention. He shared with us the desperate situation of Adventists in Zimbabwe. Janelle immediately called Karen Hanson Kotoske, director of Amistad International, a nonprofit organization with which our Amnesty International chapter had worked, to ask if she knew how or where we could help. One of Amistad's projects is the Murwira Adventist Children's Home, an orphanage in rural Zimbabwe. Karen ex-

plained the desperate need at the orphanage, and assured us that donations would safely reach their intended target.

Fortunately, the orphanage's director, Paula Leen, was visiting her daughter in Portland, Oregon, and thus was accessible by phone. Janelle called her, and listened as she explained the need of her children and of the country. After their conversation, Janelle told me that she felt so distraught, she "could not finish [her] food at dinner."

Setting Achievable Goals

Shortly thereafter, three of WWU's Amnesty International officers and four ASWWU officers met to discuss whether to "adopt" the Murwira Orphanage. We unanimously decided to raise money for its daily operations, naming the program, "Mission: Zimbabwe." We decided our clubs would have separate but equal assignments: Amnesty would create campus and community awareness, and ASWWU would host the fundraisers. Setting monetary goals and reporting on the students' progress in reaching them was important for both fundraisers and donors. It gave students a definite target to work toward, and reassured donors (who were kept updated on the progress of the fundraising through mass e-mails, the campus newspaper, and announcements at the university church) that they were contributing toward an attainable goal.

Deciding on a financial goal was not simple. Some argued



Left and center: Children from the Murwira Orphanage in Zimbabwe. Right: Auctioneers at the Date Auction.

that setting the target high would inspire students to work harder to reach it. Others worried about the negative impact of failing to reach an unattainable figure. We prayed, agreed on a target of \$15,000, and set out to fulfill our delegated responsibilities.

We asked Amistad International to partner with us through the fundraiser, to ensure the money was properly tracked and would go where it was intended. Amistad director Karen Kotoske set up a financial plan, offered tax-deductible receipts for donors, and provided a description of the orphanage's daily operations.

A Strong and Varied Advertising Program

We found that the key to increasing campus voluntarism and effective fundraising was strong advertising and dissemination of information. We could have organized the best events in our school's history, but they would have meant little if poorly attended or understood. Our plan was not simply to advertise dates and times but to help students know *what* they were giving to and *how* it would help.

Senior mass communications major Adrienne Thompson compiled five videos, which we showed each day during the first five minutes of the student-led Week of Worship immediately after Christmas break. Monday's video gave an overview of the country, Tuesday's the state of health care, Wednesday's the state of education, Thursday's the economy. Friday's video focused on the help Paula provides to her orphans and the greater community. With Janelle's help, Adrienne combined moving graphics, news clips, interviews from students who had been to Zimbabwe, and footage from the orphanage to create informative, emotional media presentations. Students were simultaneously educated and inspired to act.

In addition to these powerful videos presented to a captive audience, we employed many forms of campus advertising. ASWWU public relations VP, Grant Hummel, used posters, fliers, mass e-mails, ASWWU TV, and our newspaper, the *Collegian*, to run informational pieces and succinct date/time advertising. In order to involve the community, the ASWWU spiritual department printed bulletin inserts and donation envelopes for the university church services. Each of the orga-

nizing officers was able to give a brief history of Zimbabwe, fully understood Paula's mission and its impact, and shared that knowledge with others. The result was a student body and community empowered by understanding and eager to give.

WWU's Amnesty International's first "awareness night" featured history professor Gregory Dodds and senior history major Candice Ford. Professor Dodds spoke on the history of imperialism in Africa and its impact on developing nations today. Candice gave a summary of her senior paper on Zimbabwean history from Rhodesian colonization through President Robert Mugabe's current rule.

The second awareness night focused on personal experiences in Zimbabwe. Students Sarah Grizzel and Cas Anderson described their experiences as volunteers in Zambia and at Paula's orphanage in Zimbabwe. Junior finance major Eddie (Lwazi) Moyo told about his life growing up in Zimbabwe. When Eddie was 10 years old, the Zimbabwean military told him if he did not join the army, they would kill his family. For two years, young Eddie carried an AK-47 and forced white farmers from their homes, enacting Mugabe's land-redistribution programs, which quickly collapsed the economy.

As heartbreaking as Eddie's story was, students found it just as troubling to hear that Zimbabwe had gone downhill since his childhood. He had returned for a visit over Christmas break just weeks earlier to find chaos, corruption, and desperation.

"As I walked around my old neighborhood, I found out that most of my friends were either dead or HIV positive," he said.

The corrupt police force took most of Eddie's food at checkpoints, and the grocery store shelves were empty. Eddie's story brought the urgency of the need in Zimbabwe directly to our campus.

Choosing Fundraising Events

Choosing fundraising events that fit our campus demographics was crucial. College students enjoy dating, as well as a reason to dress up. Date auctions, in which students bid on the opportunity to spend an evening with a specific member of the opposite sex, are a good way to make new friends and raise money for causes. Date auctions at WWU had previously yielded no more than \$200 for the entire event, but Contessa and I felt one could be successful if planned carefully. We selected 29 diverse, eligible singles (males and females) who

agreed to be “auctioned” for a casual date with the highest bidder to raise money for the orphanage. During the weeks leading up to the event, we practiced our hosting scripts and asked restaurants to donate gift certificates so winning bidders would also win a free destination for their date.

Contessa and I started calling each other each night at bedtime to pray about the whole mission, asking God to guide everything we did. She constantly pled, “God, we can’t do this on our own. The need is too big and the potential gain is incomprehensible. Guide every choice we make.” We were not asking for specific needs; rather, we constantly sought His presence.

The Date Auction

Although we had hosted events for the whole student body in the past, we were more anxious about the date auction’s success

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than any other. However, our Mission: Zimbabwe team’s fears turned into joy at the start of the auction. In their formal attire, students were standing on the couches in the back of the room or outside the door trying to catch a glimpse of the stage, all eager to bid. It’s almost humorous in retrospect that we started the bids so low (\$7), as the average student raised well over \$200. The highest bidder paid \$900 for a date with his friend Laura and commented onstage, “This is the craziest thing I’ve done, but Laura and this cause are worth it.”

After reading an introductory paragraph about themselves and their interests, some auctionees performed a talent, and then the live auction began. Money flew around the room as friends helped each other outbid the competition for their desired date. The energy was incredible, but it was obviously not just about winning a date; the students knew they were contributing to an important cause.

One bidder told us he paid \$500 for his date as an alternative to going on the campus mission trip, which he could not fit into his schedule this year. Further demonstrating their generosity and commitment to the cause, many winners opened their hearts as well as their wallets, telling the “banker” to “keep the change,” which was often \$20 or \$50. Our amazement turned



Several of the contestants for the Zwim Meet.

to tears of joy when the evening’s total came to \$6,700.

The date auction, impromptu dorm collection, and Week of Worship offering brought the Mission: Zimbabwe total to nearly \$10,000 within the first 24 hours of fundraising.

Run for Zimbabwe

The next event, the Run for Zimbabwe, was easier to plan. Nearly 50 runners gathered at 7 a.m. on a cold Friday in January to sprint a mile around campus. The run attracted a reliable group of athletes, including some who may not have been interested in the date auction, and required no budget and little preparation. By charging an entrance fee of five dollars, we were able to raise several hundred dollars with this 30-minute event.

Celebrities Compete in the Zwim Meet

Part of our vision for Mission: Zimbabwe was to involve not only students but also WWU’s faculty/staff and administration, as well as the community. So after launching advertising for the next event, the Zwim Meet, we began campaigning for “local celebrity” involvement. The main event at the Zwim Meet was a 10-minute swim in which participants found sponsors to pledge a certain amount for each lap they could complete. College Place Mayor Ed Ammon, WWU President Jon McVay, and WWU Academic VP Ginger Ketting-Weller were some of the swimmers who attracted a cheering crowd to the pool. A Swimathon does not require fast swimmers, just committed pledge collectors. One student swimmer passed a pledge sheet around in all her classes. Some called their home churches to sponsor them. Adding the entrance fees of the sprint swims, the Zwim Meet raised about \$4,000 for the Murwira Orphanage.

In addition to the awareness nights, the three fundraising events, announcements at all campus church services, and a permanent donation box in a high-traffic campus building, we set up procedures for online giving on the WWU Website. This allowed for credit card donations and easy access for community members and parents.

Administrative Support and Teamwork

We were delighted at the enthusiastic support we received from WWU’s administration during this five-week project. A group of students representing two clubs, many backgrounds, majors, and future careers had decided to raise money for an orphanage halfway around the world. With God’s power, they did it. We did not have to request approval or special permission for the projects, but we did seek wisdom and support from

the administration, and gladly welcomed their suggestions and recommendations about logistics. I doubt that Mission: Zimbabwe would have raised \$37,600 if the student planners had been micromanaged by administration. Not only did the project save lives in Zimbabwe, it also fostered leadership experience among its organizers, which will enable us to achieve even greater success with our future plans for outreach.

The teamwork for Mission: Zimbabwe also contributed to its success. There were no quarrels or glory-seeking. The PR, social, spiritual, financial, and executive departments of both clubs worked toward a shared goal. Each student capitalized on his or her strengths. It was the body of Christ working together, needing each person's talents and thriving on each one's passion.

In Hindsight. . .

Looking back, I am pleased to be able to identify the successful elements of Mission: Zimbabwe, but there is always room for improvement. One such area was in our financial records. Money flooded our accounts so quickly that we could barely keep up. Although all donations were accounted for, it would have been advantageous for us to record how and from where the money came. We have only a rough estimate of the Swim Meet total because many sponsors sent money in weeks after the event and did not include a note.

Also, for a variety of reasons, we did not perform a succinct project finale. Nor did we thank donors as well as we should have. We originally thought we would conclude the fundraising when we reached \$15,000, but that amount was raised in one week, so we just kept going, eventually settling on a closing date about five weeks after the project began. Probably we should have concluded it after a month. Savoring success, and learning how to improve the next time are both valuable lessons in our service-learning experience.

Two weeks before summer break, Janelle and I had the opportunity of meeting Paula Leen, who was again visiting her daughter in Oregon. We drove the three hours to Portland, and stayed for the weekend. To finally meet the woman who had been our inspiration for the previous three months was incredibly moving. Sitting in her presence, listening to her stories of hunger, pain, miracles, and redemption was simultaneously humbling and inspiring. We know God will direct every dollar the generous WWU students and community raised to save lives.

That \$37,600 will buy medical supplies and AIDS medications, and pay hospital fees for hundreds of people in Paula's community. It will buy fuel to drive the orphans to school and take people with medical emergencies to the clinic. It will purchase scarce food and feed hundreds of people daily, keeping children and community members alive. And even more important, Paula will allocate part of that money to sustainable resources, to seeds and farm equipment, to digging wells and planting trees, to ensure that the funds will benefit future generations. ☞

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