

An International Back-to-School Story (in a Wisconsin Corn Field)

by Scott Niederjohn

Most Wisconsin students head back to school this week poised for another academic year. The TV news and local papers are filled with stories about school supplies, bus routes, school lunches and the myriad of other issues that will confront our kids as they return from their summer vacations. Flying under the radar screen is a back-to-school story, of international significance, taking place right under our noses – right in the middle of a Wisconsin corn field, no less.

Malawi, a small country by African standards, occupies an area about the size of Pennsylvania and is wedged in the southeast corner of the sub-Saharan continent between the much larger countries of Mozambique and Zambia. The World Bank lists Malawi as one of the ten poorest countries in the world. Its annual per capita income is only \$200.

Malawi is a nation of 12 million people, half of whom are under 16 years old. Even though nearly 90% of Malawi's youngest children now regularly attend primary school, fewer than 20% go on to secondary school. Malawi's teachers are grossly underpaid and under-trained, and most schools lack even basic supplies, equipment, and furniture. The HIV / AIDS epidemic spreading across Africa has not ignored Malawi; recent reports indicate that as much as 30-40% of the adult population is infected with the virus, and many hundreds of teachers die every year from the disease. The good news: something is being done about this problem right here in Wisconsin.

In August 1999, Lakeland College - located in rural Sheboygan County (right square in the middle of a Wisconsin corn field), - the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the government of the African country of Malawi began an exciting partnership to train teachers for that impoverished country. Each year, Lakeland accepts five students from Malawi for a year-round course of study that after three years leads to a Bachelor of Arts degree in education. Currently, there are fifteen Malawian students on the Lakeland campus studying to become teachers. When each group of five students returns to Malawi to continue their careers, they will be employed as instructors at one of Malawi's five primary school teacher training colleges. In other words, they will become teachers of teachers. Thus far, 25 students have graduated from Lakeland's program. Lakeland welcomed its 8th cohort of five students in August 2006.

Lakeland initiated this program to train teachers for Malawi for only two reasons: it was the right thing to do, and training teachers is one of the things Lakeland does best.

Lakeland awards each student a full tuition, room, and board scholarship. USAID provides the students with roundtrip airfare, health insurance, and a monthly stipend to cover textbooks and personal items. The government of Malawi compensates each student's family with a small subsistence stipend for loss of income while the student is studying in Wisconsin.

The selection process for these scholarships has been extremely competitive, even though the scholarships are only available to Malawi high school graduates who have already demonstrated a desire to be teachers. In 1999, there were 345 applicants vying for the five awards. In 2000, the number of applicants rose to 1400, and between 2001-06, on average, 250-300 applicants competed for the five scholarships each year.

Thus far, the initiative has been as successful as could have been imagined, both on and off the Wisconsin campus, and mostly because of the Malawi students themselves. Their strong work ethic and positive school spirit have inspired and motivated many of Lakeland's traditional students. Malawi students have distinguished themselves as able scholars as well. All maintain over a 3.0 GPA, and the median GPA for the group is above 3.5. Almost all have graduated with academic honors. Several have been inducted into a national honor society, Mortar Board.

Something special really is happening in this Wisconsin corn field. While it does not cost massive amounts of money like most U.S. foreign aid endeavors, this Malawi program does make a positive and meaningful difference for a nation that needs any positives to celebrate. As of June 2006, twenty-five graduates have returned to Malawi and are working in that country's educational system as teachers of future teachers. As your own kids put on their superhero backpacks loaded up with fresh new school supplies this week, it is worthwhile to reflect upon the conditions under which many kids throughout the world must obtain their educations. We can all feel proud that an institution in our great state is doing something about this problem, in one country, a few teachers at a time.