

05.08.18

## Looking Back, Looking Forward: An Interview with Winnie Barron

**Q** What was the situation like in Makindu back in 1998?

**A** It was desperate, totally crisis intervention. Especially for the kids who were living on the streets, in goat sheds, in abandoned cars, some even dying on the streets. We were desperate to get them off the streets, to a secure shelter, safety, with loving Guardians willing to share their homes. A big challenge was to try to move a child from a neglectful or abusive Guardian to a secure home. We wanted to provide basic medical care, food, and, hopefully, a loving, stable home. Some of the children were dying of AIDS, HIV-related diseases, and many were malnourished. Many of the Guardians had no money and were immune compromised themselves.

By providing shelter, food, and support with a stable Guardian, we were serving the children in a family home environment. Kids who had no hope, no trust, no faith in a future... all of a sudden, those kids could dream. We would put food in front of them and they would eat it so fast to the point of vomiting for fear of it being taken away. The kids had had no one to stand up for them before, to advocate for them, they believed there were no options. I thought most people would be eager for assistance, but first we had to build trust.

**Q** How did you build trust?

**A** For a couple of days we would sit in the dirt and play with the children and pretty soon they were in your lap, playing with your hair. Many of the kids were frightened at first. They would literally start screaming when they saw me because they had never seen a white person before. I told myself, "Let them come to you." The Guardians had their hopes shattered so often they thought, "Are you trustworthy?" We just sat with them, listening to their stories, learning about their lives. They were welcoming, but tentative. Within an hour we were shucking peas and laughing with them.

**Q** What was your most brilliant idea?

**A** We scrapped the idea of an orphanage within two weeks. It was too expensive. By placing kids in an orphanage, we would help, maybe, 30-40 children max. We needed an alternative to help hundreds. Instead of the traditional orphanage, we placed children in stable, loving homes in the community. Most of the kids had already lost their original homes and immediate families and many were seen as loiterers and nuisances. They were isolated, lost to the community and felt alone and helpless.

Placing them in homes gave them back a sense of family and a link to their community once again. They belonged. In Africa, the sense of community is huge. And our money can go so much farther this way. So, not having enough money forced us to rethink and we stumbled on to this "accidental brilliance." The Guardians are there for the kids and the kids are there for their Guardians; everyone benefits. At the railroad station where we started the Centre, there was only an abandoned room. There was no food, no medical care, but the children had each other. We realized we needed to start the Centre there because the kids trusted it. It was home.

**Q** What came next?

**A** We began to initiate additional services for the kids. After nutrition, medical care, and shelter were dealt with, we opened the doors to education, psycho-social/advocacy support, capacity development trainings, income-generating activities, HIV/AIDS voluntary counseling and treatment. Participation from the community grew into a commitment to helping MCC continue.

**Q** What was the initial experience like for you personally?

**A** I went to Makindu with less than \$8000 in my pocket. My Mom and friends sent care packages for the kids. I spent 4 ½ years there. I was not fluent in Swahili; now I speak a little Kiswahili and Kikamba. The first year I was too busy dealing with crises to develop a vision. I'm a paramedic, I want to put out fires, but I had no opportunity. I had to slow down and listen. I had to take a back seat. I needed knowledge, wisdom, and advice of the community to make a success of it. We had a crisis every day. Initially, we provided food at the railroad station, food only three times a week, and we paid for medical care.

Within a short time, we realized that our “desperate kids” were now the privileged ones. They were doing better than the other kids within their homes. Then we realized we had to serve the whole family.

**Q** What were some of the early challenges?

**A** I had a global vision: kids happy, healthy, and hopeful. When we moved to the Centre, people were coming in droves, asking for food, help for their children. I knew within 30 seconds the answer would be no. We simply couldn't supply what they wanted. I learned how to make a no become, to feel like, a yes. I would sit with them and give them time to share. We became a conduit for resources they never could access before; we became a referral center. I hate to say no, so we gave them a “yes” by helping them access resources and giving them our hearts. They usually left grateful, laughing and smiling.

**Q** How are our Makindu children different from African children raised in orphanages?

**A** We often have well-dressed young African men or women who grew up in orphanages dropping in to the Centre asking for help. They speak perfect English; they grew up in orphanages and received a great education there, but they were handed everything they needed. Then once they left the orphanage, they simply didn't know how to survive in Africa. They had never done it before. Our kids are savvy, they know how to “carry their Granny to the hospital,” to walk miles for water, to sleep on the ground. Their lives are tough and they learn to become tough. This new model of the children with their Guardians in their own homes helps the whole family thrive.

**Q** Let's talk about the future. What needs to happen in the next 20 years?

**A** My concern is that the more I am, the less others will be. I'm working hard at pulling back. We need a succession plan for both the Makindu Children's Center and the Makindu Children's Program. It feels right, but it's going to be difficult initially. I see both the MCP and MCC Boards as very strong, with diverse perspectives and skills, and they're all volunteers. An amazing group of folks.

My hope is that I can someday simply just be “Mama” forever for the children and families in Makindu, providing love. There are so many others now on our team who have an emotional investment and commitment, with different talents and areas of expertise. I’m replaceable. Perhaps one trip to Makindu a year for me in the future.

In 20 years, I hope the Centre still exists, that we’ve developed a model that succeeds and that our successes have become models that people share elsewhere, that the children and their families have access to resources and, most importantly, that they still have hope.

**Q** How about future financial goals?

**A** I’d like to see an endowment or a savings plan, or a Trust, some financial instrument where money could grow, We are fortunate to have help from people with brilliant ideas, like Michael Farley’s Proper Walk which has morphed into the Proper Safari....a great success.

The brilliance is that the Safari introduces participants to the children and turns them into dedicated benefactors. Here’s an example: Cheri Villa went on a Proper Safari and at MCC she met a nine-year old girl, Daniella, with a terrible clubfoot deformity who was struggling to walk. Cheri fell in love with Daniella and offered to pay for her surgery which was a huge success. Daniella now dances, jumps rope, runs everywhere. There’s now a deep personal connection between Daniella and Cheri, who has since become an MCP Board member.

From this experience, the participants on that Safari developed a medical/surgical fund for extraordinary medical needs and interventions that we otherwise could not afford. Creating ways to make personal connections between the children and potential donors can be magical.

**Q** Talk about the evolving relationship between MCP and MCC.

**A** The emotional investment and participation that MCC has developed with the community are some of the greatest gifts. MCP is the “parent” while MCC is now a legal independent entity. MCP raises funds, provides technical guidance and consultancy. In the future, I’d like to see MCC become more self-sufficient and self-sustaining. I hope the MCC Board will become even more diverse and savvy. We are lucky that Thomas is a great program manager. We need to foster an even greater sense of independence within MCC.

**Q** Do you see yourself in MCC’s future?

**A** I’m not necessary in the future. I researched Founder’s Syndrome and realized that I really needed to pull back. Maybe I avoided it before it swallowed me. Makindu became so embedded in my life, MCC was my family. I wasn’t committed to it becoming any one thing. In the beginning, it was all survival: the kids thought why invest in the future if the future wasn’t a possibility?

My dream is now a reality. The concept worked and now so many others have the drive and the commitment to help the program continue. I was lucky. The experience has been a gift and changed my life. I feel incredibly blessed to have been a part of it all.

**Q** Will the Makindu Children’s Centre continue to grow?

**A** The need is infinite. We honestly can’t continue to serve all the kids who need help. Practically-speaking, we can’t reach every child, there will always be more kids needing help. In

2018 alone, we have 531 kids enrolled in the program; over the last 20 years we've served about 14,000 vulnerable children and their families.

MCC is working with the community and the families as a means of supporting all their children. The MCC Board has developed Income Generating Activities (IGA's) as a way to achieve sustainability. The dairy project is a good example. Our cows produce plenty of milk for the children's vitamin-enriched porridge in the morning; anything left over is sold to the community. The Winnie Academy Pre-school is an IGA; the setting is safe and clean, the kids have constant care and supervision, lunch is provided. The Centre is a big family caring for the kids with hundreds of brothers and sisters. And the tuition fees help sustain the program.

**Q** What has been the Makindu Children's Centre's greatest gift?

**A** While we may never be able to guarantee that the children will have a safe and secure home in the future, MCC has nurtured their confidence and their sense of developing their own safe home and shelter within themselves. They can take that with them wherever they go. MCC is teaching them that they can sustain themselves. They now have the luxury to dream, to hope, and to know they are loved.