

Students plant seeds of life in Africa

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

A group of students and staff members from the University of Rochester went to Africa as Americans and came back as Africans.

The students and staff members said they were "adopted" by the families they stayed with in Malawi, which borders Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique in southwest Africa. For example, Marie Lewis, 31, director of community programs at the university, said she and her fellow travelers were deeply touched by the warmth and generosity they experienced in the impoverished village of Gowa. Although the village had no running water or electricity, it was rich in hospitality, she said.

"They were very nervous that their rooms wouldn't be good enough for us, and that their food would be too poor for us," Lewis said of the Talimiles, a family of six who put all four of their children in one room to accommodate Marie and freshman Laura Spilman. She noted that the family's mother gave both women traditional dresses by the end of their trip, and that the parents both referred to her and Spilman as their "daughters" throughout their stay.

"I felt like I was leaving my family," she said of her last night in Malawi.

Matt Wolfe, 21, a senior majoring in political science and economics, said he enjoyed living with the Kaludzus, another family, and even relished cutting wood for their fireplace and helping them prepare meals.

"Right from the very first evening, they adopted me right into the family," he said.

The trip was sponsored by the university's Newman Community, which is directed by Father Brian Cool. The priest said a total of 11 people, including himself, went to Malawi from Dec. 27 to Jan. 13. The trip was funded, in part, by a university grant program, student residence hall councils and the tithing committees at St. Louis Parish in Pittsford and St. John of Rochester Parish in Perinton, he said. The trip participants also sold Krispy Kreme donuts and traditional products from Malawi to fund their trip, and individuals paid for their own air fares.

Father Cool said the trip had three purposes: to help the participants discern how God was working in their lives; to exchange cultural information with the village inhabitants; and to engage in community service. After the trip was first pub-



Photo courtesy Father Brian Cool

A Malawi native (left) and David Niles, a University of Rochester student, buy mangos from children in Gowa, Malawi, after Sunday Mass. Several students from the university helped Gowa's villagers create a garden.



licized last fall at the university, the students selected to go from about 27 applicants met weekly to learn about Malawi and discuss the trip.

The trip was inspired by Father Cool's desire to go to Africa with students and was realized greatly through the efforts of Joe Lanning, 25, a history graduate student who grew up attending St. John of Rochester, where Father Cool once served. Lanning is also a recruiter for the Peace Corps at the university, and had served in Malawi for two years. Lanning has also founded the World Education Fund, which finances the education of African women.

Lanning went on the trip with his wife, Alexis Spilman, 24, a graduate student studying optics at the university and sister of Laura Spilman. Alexis noted that she and her husband thought promoting the trip was important because students become so isolated living on campus, and need to broaden their experience of life.

Gowa is among the 10 or so villages he has served, Lanning said. The university group consulted with the Gowa villagers and helped them create a demonstration garden during their time there. As famine stalks southern Africa, including Malawi, it's important for Africans to diversify their crops in order to better withstand food shortages, Lanning said. He noted that for about 30 years Malawi concentrated on growing corn for consumption and export, as well as tobacco. How-

ever, the country's soil has become depleted from "monocropping," and the practice also affects the health of the citizenry who come to rely too much on one type of food, he said.

The demonstration garden consisted of nearly 40 different types of plants, including ground nuts, sweet potatoes and a banana tree, Wolfe added. The university group also worked with the villagers to teach them composting, Father Cool said, which is more economical than using expensive fertilizers.

Lanning said that two brothers from the village, Philip and Geoffrey Mlongoti, have been trained by the Peace Corps to teach others throughout their region to diversify their crops. He added that Philip, 19, and Geoffrey, 16, continually inspired them with their desire to learn and help others.

"These are two brilliant young people who are caught in a system in a country where their intelligence is stifled, as well as their chances to achieve," he said.

He and the other trip participants noted that they wanted people in America to know more about people like the Mlongoti brothers who are eager to learn and achieve, and who represent a bright side of Africa, which is so often depicted as simply famine- and disease-stricken. That was a sentiment shared by Seth Baum, 22, a senior majoring in optics and applied mathematics at the University of Rochester, who also co-chairs the university's Community Service Network. Baum said his most "remarkable discovery" in Gowa was the father of the family with whom he stayed, Frackson Chalunda, who was headmaster of

the village's secondary school, and who taught math, biology and agriculture.

"It amazed me that even though we come from vastly different societies halfway around the world from each other, we shared a common language of science," Baum said. "Not only did Mr. Chalunda know much of the same material as I did, giving us a common ground for discussions, but I felt that he had a very familiar scientist's perspective on both scientific and nonscientific issues, as well as on life in general."

Again and again, the travelers spoke of the villagers' hospitality, Wolfe noting that it was unthinkable for them not to break bread with anyone who walked through their door. It was all the more impressive, Lanning said, because the villagers have few possessions.

"These are people who the outside world look at as impoverished and poor," he said. "But they are so generous."

EDITOR'S NOTE: To learn more about the World Education Fund, write Joe Lanning at 25 Briggs Ave., Fairport, NY 14450, or e-mail him at flan@mail.rochester.edu.

Events

• **SAT, FEB. 8** — Cabin party at Holt Road Lodge, Webster Park, sponsored by Odyssey, the Diocese of Rochester's young adult network, 1-10 p.m.; 5 p.m. prayer service, followed by chili dinner. \$7 covers dinner, cabin rental, bring dish to share. RSVP by Feb. 6 to Laura Lehner at 585/621-5672.

• **MON, FEB. 10 and WED, FEB. 12** — Discussion: "Connecting the Eucharist to My Life." Feb. 10 talk at St. Louis Church, 60 S. Main St., Pittsford; Feb. 12 talk at Good Shepherd Church, 3318 E. Henrietta Road, Henrietta; both talks start at 7:30 p.m., hosted by St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Rochester.

• **THU, FEB. 20** — Dinner at Woody's II, 2758 W. Henrietta Road, Henrietta, 7 p.m. RSVP to Jean at 585/482-9023.

• **SAT, FEB. 22** — Odyssey tour of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery, 3 p.m.; dinner after tour at location to be determined. \$7; e-mail RSVP to Roger by Feb. 20 at RSculzo1@aol.com.