

Planting Seeds of Grace

by Samantha Snively

In the weeks before spring break, Andrews University students could be overheard talking about their plans for the week. Most were going home to visit family and sleep as much as possible. Others were headed for warmer climes, or planned road trips with their friends. But every now and then, someone said, “I’m going to Africa!”

The Andrews University Department of Agriculture took over 20 students to the African countries of Lesotho and Swaziland for two weeks. The trip included several mission projects as well as some sightseeing.

The study tour group spent their first week in Swaziland, where they distributed clothes and toiletries at the Mhlosheni Care Center in partnership with Seeds of Hope Outreach (SOHO). The students also put on worship programs for the children at the Center, many of whom are orphans whose parents have died of HIV/AIDS or are teenagers responsible for their younger siblings.

Ashley Boyko, a sophomore pre-vet major, recalls that the children were “happy just to sit next to you or hold your hand; just to have attention.” Later that weekend, the group visited the Hhohho farm, owned by the Manzini Central Church but leased to SOHO. For several years, Thomas Chittick, chair of the Department of Agriculture, and Verlyn Benson, dean of the College of Technology, have been traveling to this farm, developing it and providing technical expertise. The students planted three acres of corn by hand “in 100-degree temperatures...Our students were troopers,” says Stanley Beikmann, assistant professor of agriculture, “knowing that this can help the locals become more self-sufficient in growing food and creating a market.”

The next week, the tour went south to Lesotho and spent two days at Emmanuel Mission School. Founded in the early nineteenth century as a school for lepers, it now functions as a primary and secondary school and currently houses 700 students. Earlier in the semester, the Department of Agriculture sponsored a book drive to start a library at Emmanuel Mission School, which gathered over 1,000 books to ship to Lesotho.

Emmanuel Mission School has fallen into disrepair, says Ashley Boyko. The school suffers from overcrowding, has irregular electricity, and until recently, no running water. When the students arrived, a permanent well was being drilled, which was completed before the

group left. The Emmanuel Mission students put on a cultural program to welcome the Andrews group, and very quickly found laps to sit on and hands to hold. Some took the Andrews visitors on a tour of their “sister school.” Ashley was one of these students. She peeked in the boys’ dorm, and saw that a room with 25 beds housed between 50 and 100 boys. The girls’ dorm was slightly less crowded.

Despite their minimal possessions and impoverished circumstances, the students are overjoyed to be attending school. The day Andrews students arrived, EMS canceled school to welcome them with songs and a worship service. Although the school has no instruments, says Beikmann, “They are masters of singing a capella. Their songs arise out of nowhere without the direction of a choir director. One stands up and begins to sing a solo introductory bar, and then a crescendo of voices arises low and soft, and then builds into a joyous three-part harmony. It is absolutely breathtaking to hear in a tiny little church with all the windows open and a sea of humanity to crowd into one tiny space.” As the Andrews group looked on, the students’ voices took over the song, and they began to sway and wave their hands in one mass expression of happiness.

Many of the Andrews students on the trip were surprised by the students’ contentment. One girl, a junior in high school, spoke about her experience at Emmanuel Mission School. “She was so thrilled just to be there and have the opportunity to get a Christian education,” says Ashley. The story was the same for many of the other students. “This is a second chance for many of them,” says Ashley. “They’re happy despite the conditions. I was amazed by how little they had and how content they were. These kids were four and five, and content just to hold your hand and sit along a wall.”

Although their educational resources are limited, the children at EMS have high hopes: “They want to be doctors or nurses or businessmen. But they study from 15–20 year old biology books. They can hold no labs because they have no equipment—no microscopes, not even magnifying glasses—and they still want to become doctors.”

In Africa, “we have only scratched the surface,” says Beikmann. Based on the enthusiastic response from this trip, the Department of Agriculture has already begun talking about another trip of this nature, to India in 2013. ■



Top: The group of students and faculty who took the trip to Africa; Middle: Youngsters at church in Lesotho; Above: Planting corn in 100° temperatures

