



MARA BANDA WITH MIRACLE, THE BOY THAT SHE SAVED FROM BEING KILLED BY HIS FAMILY AFTER BOTH HIS PARENTS DIED FROM AIDS

Mara Banda

Director of Paradiso Community Health Project, Malawi

MARA KUMBWEZA BANDA'S life had always been full of turmoil. When she was a girl, her father was suddenly fired from his job as a minister in the Malawian government, and the family lost their house and all the belongings inside. As a young mother of four boys, her husband died in a traffic accident. And then in 2000, Banda learned she was HIV-positive.

In those days in the Ngwenya Township southwest of Lilongwe, she remembers, people all around her were dying from AIDS. "We used to have six funerals a day. People died as couples. The wife would die in the morning and the husband would die in the evening," she said.

It was one such tragedy that changed Banda's life. One day in 2002, a woman in her community died giving birth. Her baby boy survived. But a week later, the father died as well, and the family decided quietly that they were going to kill the boy, believing he was a witch.

Banda, knowing AIDS had killed the couple, stepped in. "I said, 'You can't kill him, he's innocent. Let's keep the baby. We'll help.'"

written by John Donnelly
photographs by Dominic Chavez

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Q&A

WITH
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fees. And in 2007 she did it on just \$13,000—by far her biggest budget yet. The donations come from Americans, Scots, Norwegians, and many Malawians.

The advent of free antiretroviral treatment and the greater acceptance of people getting tested for HIV has dramatically changed the work around AIDS, she said. But the community also has greatly benefited from Banda's vision.

“She didn't want to just help herself,” said Georgina Msito, 24, Banda's niece, who now volunteers at Paradiso. “She has got a heart for others.”

So for Banda, 48, a life's worth of turmoil has abated, for the time being.

She has her health. She has the support of her four boys. She dances and sings with her volunteers nearly every week outside her building, their feet raising dust and their voices rising above the sounds of makeshift hammers striking stones in the hill above.

And she has that boy whom she helped save one night not so long ago. Sitting in a meeting room at Paradiso, she asked her youngest son to go find him. He returned a few moments later with a boy who had round cheeks and a dazzling smile.

“This is that boy—that boy we saved,” Banda said, as the boy climbed onto her lap and nestled in her arms. “We call him Miracle.”

Q: When was the moment that you felt you were committed to this work?

“When we got the building in 2003. I cried. I still cry when I think about it. [She starts to weep.] It's so emotional. It was exciting. People had acknowledged my work. My work would grow. I would have a place of my own. I cried the whole night, the whole next day. I came in that morning to sweep. Everybody was so excited. Everybody was crying.”

Q: When did you realize that working on AIDS would be so consuming?

“When the community started catching on to the work we were doing, it dawned on me that maybe I will have to do this work my entire life. It is so much better today than it was just a few years ago, when people were knocking on my door at all hours, people were dying every day. But I still have to put all my effort into this. I am starting to look at the future of the program. If God keeps me alive into my 80s, maybe—maybe—I won't be able to do all this work then” [laughs].

Q: How will you sustain Paradiso?

“We are doing a lot of outreach to the youth. It's the old way of elders handing down information. It isn't anything written down. It is young people watching elders do things. And we in turn are observing and encouraging the youth so they can fully develop. This youth team will bring this disease down. The youth have gotten really frightened about HIV and AIDS. They say they are not going to make any silly mistakes. They are going in for testing and counseling. And we have very few HIV-positive youth here.”

Q: What will be the biggest challenges in the years ahead?

“There's a very weak link between the health sector and the donors with the community-based organizations. A lot of big umbrella organizations get funding from the Global Fund or PEPFAR [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief]. But the funding often stays in those organizations, the big institutions. It's very difficult for groups like ours to access funding.

“The other big challenge is that we need to start income-generating activities. Paradiso is drifting into a donor-dependency situation. We're not doing something to sustain us. This should be our main focus ahead—to start a project that will sustain us without outside funds. We need to have a good capital base.”