

Beth's Girls

The legacy of Beth Bowers '01 gives hope and opportunity to women and girls in one Zambian village

by Linda Bowers

My Daughter, Elizabeth Rachel Bowers '01, graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in Japanese Studies. Beth went to college with the clear goal of entering the FBI when she graduated. However, her studies at Earlham, plus spending her junior year abroad at Waseda University in Japan, expanded her cultural horizons. A Waseda course on Women in Southeast Asia took her on a fieldtrip to Thailand and her first experience with a third world country. The Earlham environment reinforced her realization, as a child of privilege, of the need to "give back" to those less fortunate. As a result, Beth joined the Peace Corps upon graduation.

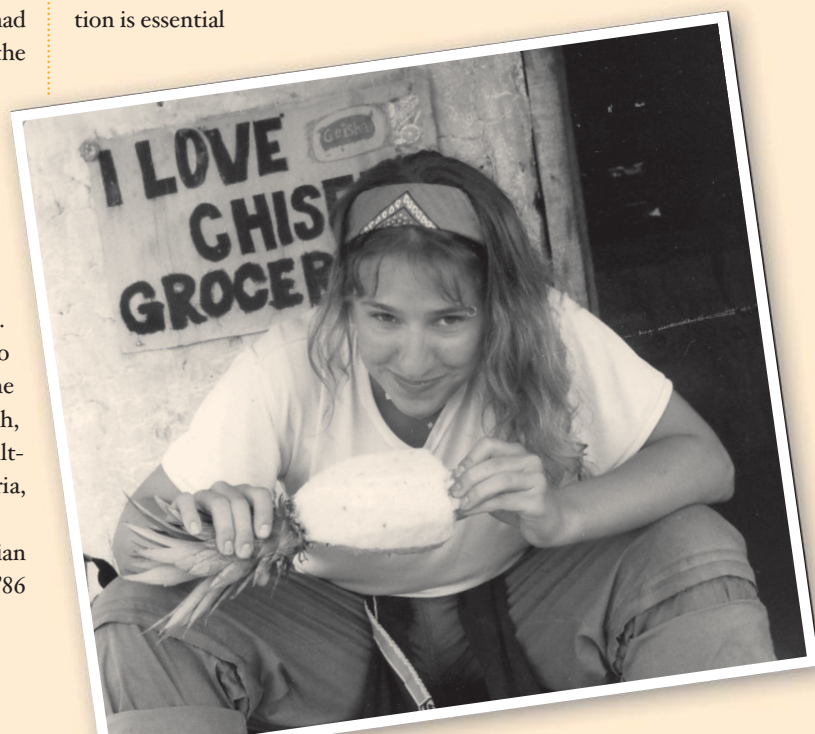
Beth's adventurous spirit led her to Lumwana West, a remote rural village in the Northwestern Province of Zambia, to teach aquaculture to farmers living in poverty. Raising fish in ponds of their own creation added protein to their diet as well as providing income. Beth loved fly-fishing with her dad in the beautiful Pacific Northwest since she was a little girl, so the work was a natural fit for her. She lived in the village in a small hut next to her Zambian "mother" and "father," learning the Lunda tribal language, and teaching the local children karate (Beth had a black belt from years of study in Shito Ryu karate). The children, the villagers, and the farmers loved working with Beth as part of their community and teaching her about their culture.

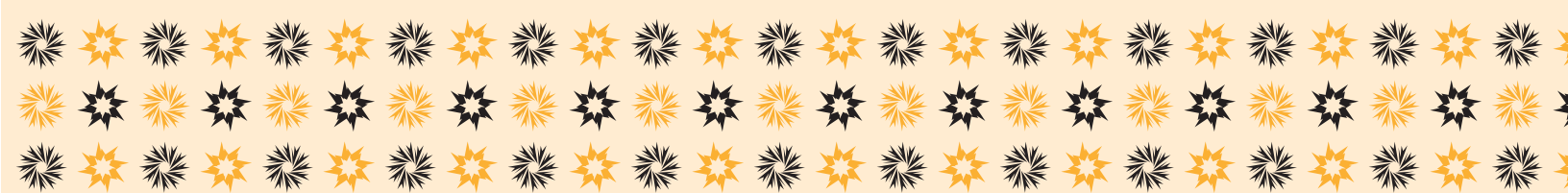
Life in a remote village is basic subsistence living without electricity, telephones, computers, or any other method of communication with the world at large. Travel is by foot or by bicycle, and the roads are in poor repair, becoming almost impassable during the rainy season. In a world of poverty, the difference between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is apparent in even the tiniest things. Thus, the Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in the area chose not to wear the required bicycle helmets, since it was a symbol of the "haves" and made them look like foreign intruders. Alas that Beth, on one of her long trips between villages, suffered an accident resulting in serious head trauma. Peace Corps air-lifted Beth to Pretoria, South Africa to receive state-of-the-art medical care.

The Earlham Alumni Network put out a call for us for a civilian advocate to stay with Beth until we arrived. Francis Kinghorn '86

answered the call and sat with Beth, sending us detailed messages about her condition while my husband Gerry was in flight to South Africa. Thus we learned quickly to rely on the kindness of a fast-developing community of strangers halfway around the world. Peace Corps assured us that we were an integral part of their family, assisting us in every way possible. When Beth passed away on March 6, 2002, one month before her 23rd birthday, she continued to "give back" by donating her organs to 22 South African recipients from whom we have received grateful letters. Beth sustained her vision of working toward global peace and understanding in every way possible.

Through the Peace Corps Partnership Program we established a memorial fund in Beth's name. With these donations, we decided to sustain Beth's vision by continuing her work in Zambia where a little money goes so far. We established the Elizabeth Bowers Memorial Scholarship Fund to educate girls from Beth's village from 8th through 12th grades. Today, going to school is the best chance Zambian women have to take control of their lives. An educated population is essential





if Zambia is to combat HIV/Aids, gender inequality and the overwhelming problems of poverty. In an undeveloped area where parents do not have enough money to educate all their children, it is the boys who will receive the privilege of attending school. We knew Beth would encourage our focus on the education of women.

While there were few if any women attending school before the scholarship began in 2002, we now have 51 girls in grades 8-12. This is a critical mass of young women who are beginning to view the future in a whole new way. Today, they are asking us to send them to college. They have many dreams. They want to be teachers, doctors and nurses, and accountants. We are hoping to develop our scholarship fund to accommodate their college hopes. We will ask them in turn to give back to their community in significant ways. The young women write to us regularly, referring to us as “mum” and “dad.” They call themselves “Beth’s Girls” and tell us that Beth’s Girls are famous in their area. Our Lunda Board Member, Fordson Kafweku, who works for World Vision Zambia in Lusaka, told us “We see ourselves as family in Zambia. When you educate me, you educate my family.” He said we are “saving lives” through our scholarships.

In addition, we awarded a scholarship to Mary Lundeba, Beth’s aquaculture instructor and a single parent of two young boys, to pursue her Master’s Degree in Aquaculture at the University of Malawi. Mary took her M.S. degree in August 2005. Because of the outstanding quality of her work, Mary has received a full-tuition scholarship from her international advisers and has begun her doctoral studies for Penn State University by continuing her research at Lake Malawi. We continue to assist Mary with the tuition fees of her boys. We are especially proud of Mary’s hard work and determination, and consider her a model for the rest of Beth’s Girls.

Because of the two-year turnover of Peace Corps volunteers, we currently partner with World Vision Zambia. Our WVZ agent works in Mwinilunga, the location of the boarding school where Beth’s Girls attend high school. The girls must pass a series of exams at the end of 9th and 12th grades. When we discovered that only one out of six seniors passed her exams, we began to inquire why. With the help of PCV

research, we discovered that Beth’s Girls simply do not have the books and supplies they need to be successful in their studies. We are now supplying tutoring for 9th and 12th grade girls and partnering with Peace Corps to build a memorial library in Lumwana West.

We plan to visit Lumwana West for the first time in late summer 2006 to dedicate the memorial library, to meet Beth’s Girls, and to meet and thank personally some of the kind strangers who have helped to sustain Beth’s vision.

The success of our efforts in Lumwana West has encouraged us to found a non-profit organization, the Elizabeth Bowers Zambia Education Fund. The core of our mission is to sustain Beth’s vision for global peace and understanding. As we have faced the innumerable challenges of working halfway around the world with people we have never met, we have learned to rely on a global community of kind and caring strangers. Whatever the challenge, when the situation becomes most difficult, someone or something will present itself as the perfect resolution to our dilemma. We know Beth’s spirit is guiding us to continue giving back where such support is so sorely needed. The ripples of the Earlham community’s vision of service are encircling the globe.

For more information, visit bethsgirls.org.



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