
Volume 17
Number 1

*Library Wonders and Wanderings: Travels Near
and Far (Spring 2011)*

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Pendell, K. (2014). Muli bwanji? How are you? Volunteering at a Health Resource Center in Zambia. *OLA Quarterly*, 17(1), 15-19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1313>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Muli bwanji? How are you? Volunteering at a Health Resource Center in Zambia

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In October 2009, my fiancé, Craig, and I moved from Chicago to Lusaka, Zambia for six months. Craig had been working for World Bicycle Relief (WBR) as a product manager for over two years. WBR is a non-profit whose primary operations are in Zambia, supplying other non-profits with bicycles to support existing health care and education programs. I was an Information Services Librarian in the health sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago. We both felt it was time to move on from Chicago, and WBR wanted Craig to live in Zambia full time. Over drinks one night at our neighborhood bar, we decided to make the move. I finished up some projects at work, resigned from my position, put most of my belongings in storage, and successfully pleaded with my sister to take care of my cat.

Craig had already taken several long trips to Lusaka, and I'm an experienced traveler myself. Most of my travel has been in developing countries, places like Bolivia, Nepal, and Cambodia. But I had always been a backpacker, easily moving from place to place; committing to day-to-day living in another country was a new challenge.

Lusaka is a sprawling city of over one million people, where long roads connect neighborhood compounds, sprawling markets, and farms. Overall, the architecture of Lusaka is simple and suburban in character; most of the downtown district is comprised of one-story concrete buildings. Many residents of Lusaka live in densely populated compounds, often with irregular sources of water, electricity, or health care services. Upper class Zambians and expatriates (expats) are more likely to live in houses, which are circumscribed by high walls and guarded gates.

Craig and I lived a few miles out of the city, in a cottage apartment on a large, gated estate owned by a British and Zambian couple. Each morning, we traveled along Leopard's Hill Road, bustling with men and women going to their office jobs in the city. Many other women headed away from the city to farms, walking on the roadside in their brightly printed *chitenge* wrap skirts, hand hoe slung over their shoulder and often a child on their back.

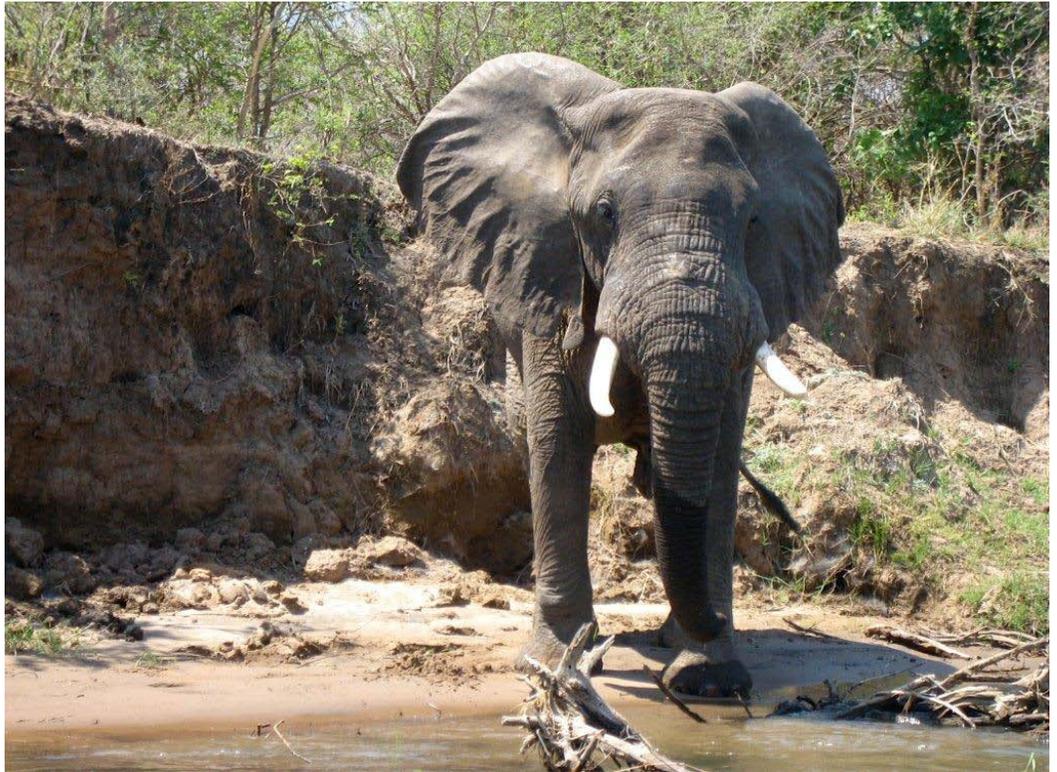
And here our life was mostly normal, but with the underlying awareness of being an outsider. Craig and I spent a lot of time stuck in traffic, minivan buses packed with passengers zooming by us on the unpaved shoulder of the road. We shopped for groceries at one of the big South-African owned grocery stores full of familiar items, except for the barrel of dried caterpillars in the bulk food section. I went to the local open-air market as often as possible for fresh produce or bartered with women for tomatoes and onions on the dusty roadside. We went to parties at friends' houses, and swam in backyard pools. We even went to yoga classes three days a week at the Alliance Française, the quasi-official meeting place of expats in Lusaka.

One major difference in our day-to-day living was our maid, Liz. I was reluctant to have a maid at first, uncomfortable at the thought of someone else washing our dishes and laundry. It seemed like such an undeserved luxury. But, as many friends pointed out, we were providing valuable employment to Liz, and turning down her service would be a hardship for her family.

We also travelled outside of Lusaka when Craig's work schedule allowed. We visited Victoria Falls twice, once in dry season and once in rainy season. During the dry season visit, we swam in the Devil's Pool at the very edge of the falls—a 350-foot drop into the mist. Another extraordinary adventure was our camping trip to the Lower Zambezi. We camped near the river during dry season, where there were an incredible number of animals nearby, including herds of elephants. I was particularly nervous when a few elephants moved into our campground in the middle of the night to eat from the surrounding trees. I could hear



each elephant munching on fruit, less than five feet from our tent. Monkeys also arrived in camp, stealing our bread and fruit whenever we had our backs turned. Making a meal required an extra person to stand guard against the quick moving monkeys, occasionally whacking a large stick on the ground for added “stay away” emphasis. Thankfully, none of the local hippos or crocodiles decided to visit.



Local elephant.



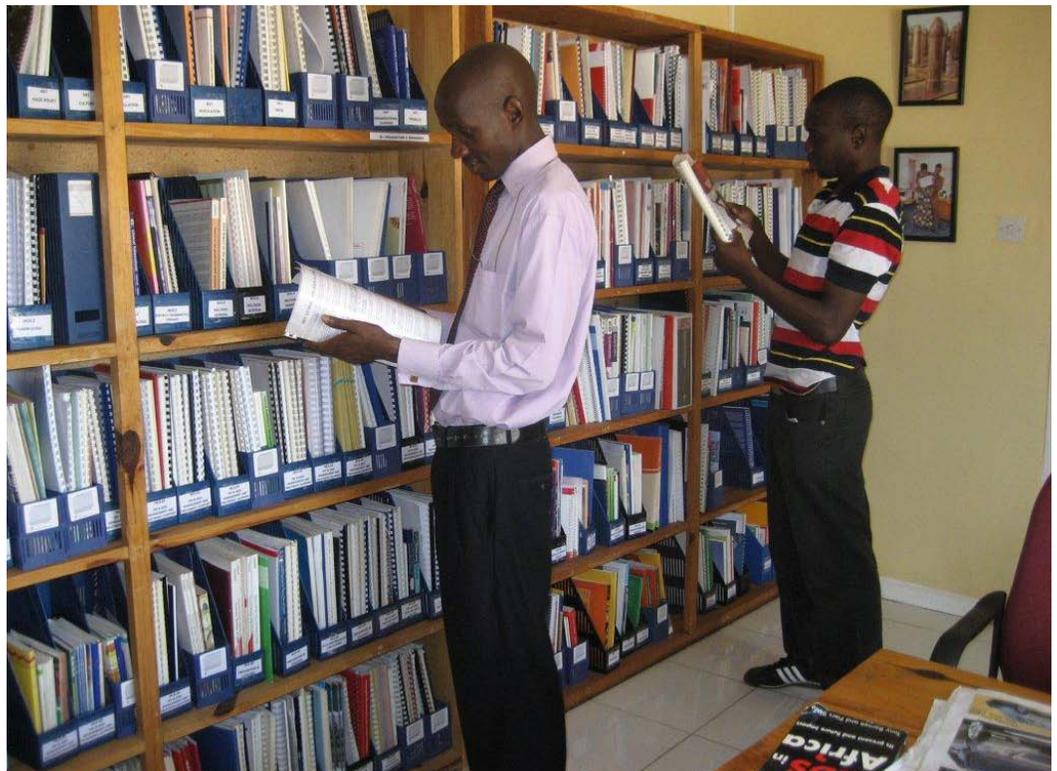
Group at the Devil's Pool.

We adjusted to this new normal, swimming in waterfalls, employing a maid, and taking our place in Zambia's international community of expats.

Once we settled in, I was eager to volunteer at a local organization where my library skills would be of use. Luckily, rumor spread quickly through the expat community that there was a librarian in town. The executive director of Afya Mzuri, a Zambian non-governmental organization (NGO), soon contacted me, and I become a volunteer librarian at the Dziwani Knowledge Center for Health.

For almost ten years, Afya Mzuri ("good health" in Swahili) has been providing HIV/AIDS related workplace and behavior change trainings, as well as collecting, managing, and disseminating HIV/AIDS information. The Dziwani Knowledge Center for Health houses the reference and media collections, Internet cafe, and media viewing room. Dziwani also acts as the collection and distribution site of the Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials archive. I volunteered at Dziwani for the duration of my time in Zambia, working closely with Zambian staff to build their Web site (<http://www.afyamzuri.org.zm/dziwani/>) and organize the IEC archive.

Dr. Alison Matutu is the executive director of Afya Mzuri; she oversees 13 staff between Dziwani, workplace trainers, and administrative staff. Dziwani has a Resource Center Coordinator, a Resource Center Officer, an IT manager, and one or two volunteers. Kangwa Nkonge, the Coordinator; Wilson Bwalya, the Officer; and Paul Phiri, a fellow volunteer, are all graduates of the University of Zambia's bachelor degree program in library science. Just like here in the States, it can be difficult in Zambia to find entry-level library positions, so Paul volunteered full-time for several months as a cataloger in order to get valuable experience on his resume.



Dziwani reference collection.



The reference collection at Dziwani is comprised of donated books and reports from various health related NGOs and government agencies. When a large program contract has ended, departing staff bring over boxes of materials that must be sorted, selected, and cataloged. Many materials are quite old when judged from the perspective of a health sciences librarian in the States, but it's difficult to disregard the value of these materials when viewed in context of a sparse collection and extensive local need for accurate information. At our department meetings, we worked to update and formalize collection development criteria that would better assist Kangwa and Paul in selecting from the many boxes of donated materials. Dziwani is also working to broaden its collection beyond HIV/AIDS into other important local concerns such as malaria, tuberculosis, and maternal and child health.

Culturally appropriate and effectively targeted health promotion materials are valuable. Unfortunately, many health programs have spent time and money in creating similar materials. In an effort to lessen the duplication of effort, Dziwani established an archive of IEC materials. The archive includes handbooks, posters, pamphlets, videos, and audio recordings. The IEC archive materials were developed, tested and validated for use within Zambia. Most materials are available in the seven primary tribal languages and English. A previous volunteer had accomplished the task of obtaining copyright permissions to reproduce many of the materials. I worked on organizing the archive by material creator, matching materials with their digital master files, and establishing a workflow for the entry of materials into Dziwani's catalog. The archive is steadily becoming an important resource to health and community organizations in Zambia, with one or two requests each week for materials.

While working with the archive, I often browsed the handbooks or watched the short videos. One video from a malaria prevention campaign told the story of a mother who brought home a mosquito net for her child's bed. When the father sees the net, he is tempted to use it to catch fish instead. A debate ensues, and the mother successfully explains why it is so important to use the net for the bed, not fishing. Paul explained that this is a common issue in Zambian villages as resources are often appropriated for another use. Catching fish to eat and sell at the market might well outweigh the less immediate threat of malaria. This is one example of how poverty shapes the choices made by many Zambians.

Many librarians around the world will recognize some of the challenges faced by Dziwani, if perhaps on a different scale. The Center has no funding for collection development, not enough space to grow (a shipping container currently acts as the storage room for distribution materials), and intermittent Internet outages on an already inadequate connection. One of the biggest challenges Dr. Matutu faces as the executive director is the forever shifting nature of her budget and staff. Contracts begin and end, often times with gaps or delays in between. Also, donors often prefer to fund onetime costs, like equipment, rather than recurring costs, like staff salaries. Keeping skilled staff is difficult when their jobs are insecure due to funding.

Still, the organization is doing a remarkable job serving Zambia's many health promotion programs by providing access to research and materials. Any Zambian may use the reference and media collections, as well as the Internet café. From my impression, public access to research information is fairly rare in Zambia. When developing the Dziwani Web site, I built upon Dziwani's commitment to access by integrating a PubMed Central search form on each of the health topic pages, creating a direct link from their Web site to full text journal articles. I also successfully applied for an account with HINARI, the World Health



Organization program that provides organizations in developing countries free access to an array of health sciences research journals.

International volunteers are valued at Dziwani for their ability to share their expertise with local staff. Zambian staff members are less likely to have experience in a digital environment, and the presence of experienced volunteers can help build local capacity in areas such as digitization of materials and Web site development. Dr. Matutu recently reported that the organization has expanded their international volunteer program. Currently, a German is volunteering, along with a Peace Corps worker, and a volunteer from Japan will soon join them.

Volunteering at Dziwani gave me the opportunity to connect with Zambians professionally and personally. We talked about library science programs, discussed the frustrations of Internet outages and server crashes, and developed a style guide for the blog. Paul and I became friends, passing our time talking about Zambian and American politics while cataloging archive materials. Paul had fun trying to teach me phrases in Nyanja, and we made endless jokes out of my responding to any question with “*ile che*” (“it’s cool”). On my last day at Dziwani, the staff presented me with a beautiful *chitenge*, and I was honored that they had considered me a colleague for those six months. 🌿



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