



Students at Spark Ventures' partner school in Zambia prepare for a day of classes. The school boasts an impressive 100 percent pass rate for seventh grade students advancing to secondary school. (Photos provided by Spark Ventures and Julia Styles)

Standing with Zambia: Spark Ventures

By Kami L. Rice



Spark Ventures' Rich Johnson tours the poultry farm that generates revenue to sustain community programs at Spark's partner organization in Zambia.



Zach Hayes, a current North Park student, reads English with partner students in May 2011.

With spray from one of the world's largest waterfalls misting nearby and a brilliant blue sky peppered with fluffy clouds above, Jaimie Rickards, then a North Park University junior majoring in nursing, was baptized by Pastor Charles Mumba. It was May 2010, and she was in Zambia for the second time with a University Ministries trip, working with Hope Ministries, North Park's global partner in Zambia. Mumba is Hope Ministries' executive director.

When Rickards came to Zambia the first time, in December 2008, to help with North Park's medical clinic for Hope Ministries' children, she arrived as a young woman who was culturally Jewish and skeptical of Jesus. She thought people who believed in a man who rose from the dead were crazy. "I have to put emphasis on this because I was that person who never imagined herself believing in Jesus," she said.

Yet, in the Twapia community in Ndola, Zambia, listening to a sermon under a blue tarp covering the wooden shack where the host church met, Rickards became overwhelmed with emotion and felt like God was speaking to her for the first time. She returned to the United States fascinated with Jesus, needing to know why he is spoken of so highly.

During her second trip, Rickards arrived in Zambia as a student leader eager to show others an amazing experience, hoping their lives could be changed like hers had been.

While there, she began grasping the importance of baptism, and realized she wanted to be baptized when she returned to Chicago.

A teammate encouraged her not to wait. "He was right," Rickards said. "What better place to get baptized than the place where I first met God, and by the Zambian pastor who preached the sermon which changed my life forever?" So Rickards and two other students were baptized at the head of Victoria Falls on Zambia's border with Zimbabwe, symbolizing the beauty of the body of Christ coming together.

As Mumba said, "It was a humbling experience that made us appreciate the goodness of God. To see our friends be willing to be baptized here with us was a great testimony to our people." He noted that Zambia has traditionally been a focus of mission work, and it encouraged the people of his church to see that they could be missionaries, too.

Standing alongside

The relationship of Mumba and his community with North Park began in 2006 when Rich Johnson, then North Park's director of University Ministries, asked Mumba a pivotal question. Johnson and two friends were in Zambia on a two-week volunteer vacation. Overwhelmed by the needs he observed while working alongside Mumba and his wife, Margaret, at their orphanage and school—initiatives that began in the early 2000s when the Mumbas responded to needs in their

church—he asked Mumba, “What do you need?” Johnson was already anticipating the answer would be money.

Instead, Mumba said they needed partners to stand alongside them until they could stand on their own. Johnson admits he had not previously considered that some grassroots organizations do not want to be dependent on outside money.

Spark Ventures was born the next year. Its mission is to partner with high-impact organizations that serve children in impoverished areas. Spark helps them increase their effect by providing human resources, strategic guidance, and financial capital. Spark also assists them with the launch of businesses whose profits provide sustainable and long-standing support for their work with children.

Hope Ministries is Spark’s first partner. Recently, Spark welcomed a partner in Nicaragua. The organization’s vision is to use this model to help vulnerable children in four continents in the next 10 years.

Helping hope expand

Since the launch of the Spark-Hope partnership, Hope Community School has grown from 75 children to nearly 350 children who fill the new seven-classroom building that increased the school’s capacity, reduced class sizes, and improved the quality of education. Teachers working essentially as volunteers are now paid regular salaries, and have access to more classroom resources.

New homes for the orphanage have increased capacity to 30 vulnerable children. Twenty children, many of whom lost their parents and caretakers to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, are presently receiving food, clothing, and education, along with support for physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. More children will be welcomed when funding is available to care for them. Most of the original children cared for by the Mumbas are now in high school.

In 2011, Spark invested \$100,000 in the development of Hope Ministries’ poultry



Clarisa Johnson C'12 performs health screenings for Hope students in May 2011.

farm in Lusaka, Zambia. Built and operated by Hope Ministries, the farm will raise nearly 200,000 chickens per year when it reaches capacity, generating more than \$100,000 in income for Hope Ministries and providing local, sustainable revenue that will ensure long-term nutrition, education, and health care for all children served by Hope’s school and orphanage.

Hope Ministries now employs more than 25 community members who work as teachers, social workers, and office staff, as well as in other roles. Additionally, the percentage of children Hope serves that test positive for malaria has declined dramatically since the beginning of the twice-a-year medical clinics offered by North Park and Spark Ventures.

Deep relationships continue after the trip

For many North Park students, a Spark Ventures trip to Zambia is just the beginning. They become attached to Spark’s model and continue to volunteer with the organization in Chicago or seek ways to live out what was modeled for them in Zambia.

Sara Blumenshine, a 2010 University graduate in elementary education, returned to Zambia for six months as a Spark global

intern. She worked alongside a Zambian educator, teaching reading, English, and science to students in sixth grade. She also ran a reading program after school. “I fell in love with the people and the culture and the mission of Spark and Hope,” she said. In addition to serving on Spark’s junior board, she is a paraprofessional teacher at a Chicago charter school that serves immigrants and refugees.

While she was working as a resident director at North Park, Nilwona Nowlin, now earning dual degrees in nonprofit administration and in Christian formation from North Park Theological Seminary and the School of Business and Nonprofit Management, traveled to Zambia with two student teams. Afterward, she began volunteering at Spark to stay connected to the work in Zambia. She now works for Spark part-time as accounting manager.

“The thing that is special about Hope is that it’s an organization started and run by people who are native to Zambia,” she noted. “They’re doing what they set out to do, and it’s being done well.”

Following her dramatic spiritual experiences in Zambia, Rickards sponsored a Zambian child for two years. “I am both happy and sad he no longer needs my help,” she said.

Model partnerships

Following Johnson's lead, North Park teams have traveled to work alongside Hope Ministries one to two times every year since 2007. They also recommended adding a medical component.

Normally, half of each 17-person team is comprised of nursing students. Students earn academic credit toward their community health clinical programs by running the clinic that assesses about 400 Hope House and Hope Community School children. As Assistant Professor of Nursing Heather Duncan notes, these clinics are the only health care available to area children. Efforts are underway to open the clinic to students' families, expanding the sustainability of the clinic's investment in improving community health. Duncan traveled to Zambia for the fourth time in May.

In addition to reading to Hope Community School children, and helping with cleaning and other jobs, Mumba says North Park teams also inspire the children when they tell about themselves, their studies, and how they view the future. It helps children consider careers and a university education. Also significant are North Park students' testimonies of how God answered their prayers for money to come to Zambia.

Johnson, now CEO of Spark Ventures, said he loves North Park's emphasis on significance and service. "That certainly influenced me during my time on staff there, but more importantly it influences students. North Park seems to attract students who care about issues of social justice, and that's a big part of the experience for students who go to Zambia." Students learn about privilege and feel a responsibility to use it to benefit others, he said.

Duncan adds, "We want students to have a Christ-centered worldview, have compassion, and have a passion for bettering the world ... and [the partnership with Hope Ministries and Spark Ventures] just embodies that."

Eye on the future

"The reason Spark started is because we saw that these grassroots organizations are looking for something people aren't providing. That's the sustainability piece," Johnson explained. "Our philosophy is that you don't go in as the savior, but go in and work alongside of [our partners], collaborate with them, and mostly work under their leadership because it's their country."

In addition to helping facilitate North Park teams in Zambia, Spark leads other trips

to expose participants to its partnership model of development. Last year, Spark partnered with Groupon Grassroots to offer an "Africa Volunteer Vacation" through Groupon Getaways. The new venture for both Spark and Groupon was a grand success, selling out and requiring the addition of an extra trip this past February.

Hope's impact in providing children with nutrition, education, and medical care increases as Spark helps them develop their leadership team and gain skills in writing good job descriptions, establishing accountability structures, fundraising, and more, Mumba said. He has watched many development efforts in Zambia die out when outsiders initiating an enterprise leave without seeing locals adopt ownership. For Mumba, it is not only about Hope Ministries' continuation during his lifetime. Finding generational successors is also necessary for the school and orphanage to continue when he other current leaders are no longer there.

For more information about Spark Ventures, please visit www.sparkventures.org



Global Partnerships teams travel regularly to Zambia to work with Hope School students, as did this team in May 2011.