

A Bittersweet Goodbye

The van rocked as its tires turned over the gravel road. The unpredictable bumps startled my thoughts. I glimpsed at the world outside of the cramped vehicle. An unfamiliar scene played out before me. The land looked nothing like home. Small town Texas could not compare to the mountain ranges and acacia trees I saw as a new acacia tree appeared outside the window with each acceleration.

The feel of the drive changed as the van took a turn on an unknown driveway. Passing through the gate of the property, my eyes lit up as the sign, 'School for Physically Disabled Children' came into view. The van started to stir with excitement. Fourteen pairs of eyes all peered to look quickly out of the vehicle. Our van contained fourteen people, speakers, microphones, bouncy balls, and bubbles waiting to be used.

Like clockwork, us interns unloaded our equipment. As we turned on the speakers and plugged in the microphones, we watched as the crowd gathered before us. Teachers and students from every grade observed as we prepared. Some of the kids sat in their wheelchairs, and others stood with a crutch, while most sat on the green grass of the soccer pitch underneath a shaded oak tree. From an outside perspective, a language barrier between us Americans and the school attendees may have seemed impossible to communicate without spoken words. But just as we had done so many times before, we connected in the way that brings people together the most: through music.

By the third song all the students had joined in. Even the teachers reluctantly tapped their feet or sang along. Giggles erupted between each of the kids as they watched their friends and funny Americans dance before them. Closing off our dancing introduction, all of the interns went and stood with the crowd. All except for me.

With a clammy hand, I held the mic, wiping each sweaty palm off on my pant leg. Pastor Fundilé, a friend and our translator stood by patiently waiting as I commanded my lungs to breathe deeply. I nodded reassuringly; more for myself than him. *This is what I was made to do.*

"Sanibonani!" I greeted the crowd cheerfully.

"Yebo!" Their voices shouted collectively in response.

“Injani?” I asked how they were doing, a familiar exchange of conversation in their culture.

They responded, “Siyaphila!”, overjoyed that an international visitor could speak isiZulu.

“I’m going to tell you a story.” I turned to Pastor Fundilé, giving him the microphone to translate.

With anxiety no longer consuming me, and with the help of my fellow “actors”. We were able to tell the story of a man named Jesus and His mission to save the world from sin. I began by sharing it with the children in a way they would understand as my intern friends acted out the scene animatedly. Wrapping it altogether I welcomed anyone that wanted to give their life to Jesus. With several students’ hands raised, I asked them to repeat after me, or, after Pastor Fundilé, as I prayed the salvation prayer. After closing us all in this prayer, I passed the microphone on to the next intern to transition the group to the next activity.

With glee we unloaded the new toys for the kids. Laughter, bubbles, and music echoed around me. *Unreal, and almost unbelievable.* My eyes shifted from each child to the next. Joy was displayed on each of their faces. The lush green soccer field contained children from every age. Some danced along to the songs goofily with my intern friends, while others kicked the soccer balls around. The ones that could run, chased the bubbles. Even the bubbles themselves seemed to welcome the chase as the wind blew them further. As I held a bubble bottle, the two young girls' smiles matched my own.

"Are you ready?" I asked lightheartedly. Witnessing a child's reaction to bubbles has always reminded me of a child's innocence and fascination with the world around them. With quick nods and antsy feet, their anticipation grew by the second. Releasing the bubble wand from the bottle, the wind carried the bubbles across the field. With held hands, the girls bounced after them.

Passing the bubble wand to another intern I noticed a young boy in a wheelchair observing his fellow schoolmates kicking the balls and chasing the bubbles. His smile beamed as he watched each of them play. As I walked up to meet him, his welcoming grin filled my heart.

“Sawubona!” I greeted him in his language.

“Hello!”, and he responded in my own.

Impressed, I smiled and asked him some things about himself.

With delayed speech, he picked each of his words carefully, responding in perfect English; telling me about his friends, his classes, and more. His responses came with starts and stops but his intelligence shone through with each sentence. I was in awe of his courage. As the music grew louder and more friends joined us, we started to dance along to the music until giggles overtook us from watching both of our not-so-talented dance moves.

“You have a way with kids.” I glanced up as one of the teachers watched our interactions, “They love you.”

My heart soared at the unexpected compliment.

“They’re amazing,” was all I could seem to say.

“Have you ever thought about being a teacher?”

I nodded with a grin as we struck up a conversation, telling her that I always had a heart for those that felt unwanted or unloved, but especially children. Though the lifestyle wasn’t appealing to most, I wanted to be a missionary.

From the research I had done before, I told her I learned that children born with disabilities in Africa are seen as monsters or as possessed by demonic presences. They are cast out from their families, sometimes even killed. She affirmed my research, stating that several students’ stories were similar to that. I looked at the little boy in his wheelchair, not knowing his story, but knowing how loved he was by his Creator. As a few short minutes passed, an unexpected announcement rang through the field. It was time to go.

I crouched to his eye-level, not ready to say goodbye as unwelcomed tears stung my eyes.

“Don’t cry.” He said in his quiet voice. “You have changed my life.”

Bittersweetly, I shook my head. No, it was he that had changed mine. With one last hug I walked him to his teacher, knowing that I would never see him again. But also knowing I would never forget him.