



The Power of Giving Opportunities

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I had the chance this week in Malawi to meet some incredible young people whose lives have been transformed by the Youth in Action (YiA) Program. YiA supports rural youth in five countries in Africa to improve their literacy, numeracy and financial skills while then giving them an opportunity to either start a business, acquire technical training at a vocational school or go back to formal school. Most youth in the program either choose to get vocational training or to follow the entrepreneurship pathway whereby they get capital to start a business.

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is ranked according to the UNDP human development index 173 out of 188 countries and according to the World Bank over half the population is poor and one quarter live in extreme poverty. This context of extreme adversity, gives the stories I heard even greater meaning. The stories, although diverse, all speak to the power of providing opportunities and support to rural youth who otherwise would not have the means of getting out of vicious cycles of extreme poverty.



The youth I met, all live in remote rural communities where there are no paved roads, no running water, no electricity, no internet, and where basic services such as schools and hospitals are at a distance. Life in their communities moves at a very slow pace, a pace which most of us in Canada would chafe at. Most have not gone beyond primary school and their lives revolve around making ends meet for themselves and for their families. Many get piece meal jobs, working on farms for a day or two, many have tried their hand at small business, making and selling goods, fruits or wares. All struggled to see any future for themselves. Subsistence farming remains in Malawi the main source of employment.

An hour and half out of Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, we arrived in Champhoyo Village, in the central Nchisi district. I was here to visit Martida, a YIA graduate who had started her own hair salon. As I descended the car, I was struck at how out of the way and isolated this community really was and how difficult it must be to deliver the program; I am surrounded by a few huts, dirt roads and hills. The nearest

school and hospital are kilometres away. There are no shopping centres, no large stores. The strip we are on, dotted with a few ramshackle and tiny structures is the community's small trade and service center. Martida's salon is tiny, smaller than some people's walk in closets here in Canada. One of the walls holds a poster of different styles of men haircuts. Another holds clippers, scissors, the tools of the trade, many which she got with YiA capital at the vocational school where she trained. An old style hair dryer sits just outside the tiny salon run on a small solar powered generator.



Martida is 19 year of age, a single mom to a little boy who is 3.5 year. Before joining the program, Martida was unemployed, living with her mother and siblings, barely making ends meet. She heard of YiA through her community chief and applied. The selection process sees hundreds of youth between the ages of 12 to 18 who dropped out of school, trying to get into the program but only a handful are selected. After only being with Martida a few minutes, I am not surprised that she qualified. The first thing that struck me about her was the sparkle in her eye, her smile and the quiet confidence and poise with which she carries herself and speaks.

Martida explained to me how the program provided her with an opportunity to refine her reading and writing skills, learn how to manage her financial resources and to critically begin to look at livelihood opportunities in her community. She learned how to understand the market by mapping out what was already offered in the community, gaps in terms of services and the importance of savings and customer service. Through the process, she acquired a renewed sense of purpose. Martida was offered to start a small business or to receive vocational training. She chose to go into the hairdressing technical training stream with the idea of then opening up her own salon. In Martida's case, her salon has an interesting spin on this traditional trade. She services both women and men, which is unusual in her community. She said that at first, the men resisted going to her for barbershop services but eventually they came around and she now has a steady clientele of both men and women. Her salon is the only one in the community;

Martida is saving, not a huge amount by our standards, 500 Kwacha a week (less than \$1 CAD), but she has already used some of her profit to buy chickens to start a parallel business.

Martida eventually wants to open up other salons in a nearby community and hire young people like her to run them. She is doing well and her family, who supported her all along, are pleased with the results. When I asked what she would say to other young people who might be starting the program. She said: “They need to be patient and put in the work and that eventually you see results. Many young people want instant gratification; I have learned that money alone does not make a successful business. You need to learn some skills to become successful”.

“NEVER” Look Back



The YIA team then took me to meet Never, also 19 years of age. After driving for another 45 minutes through farmland, small villages, a school we came to a cross roads and we saw Never running towards our car to greet us. I was told by the Save the Children team that he had chosen bricklaying as his vocational training.

I am not sure what I was imagining, but it was certainly not the dynamic, well-spoken thoughtful young man Never turned out to be. He also had that same sparkle in the eyes that Martida did. We spoke at the location of his most recent project. A well-built brick house with multiple rooms and an iron sheet roof, a luxury in these communities where most houses are made of mud with hatched hay for roofing and are just one large room. The house had been commissioned by the local government and represented

a huge opportunity for Never, who through word of mouth is growing his clientele. The Save the Children staff with me were all amazed at the quality of his work and how well he is doing.

Never's story is quiet sad. He lost his mother when he was 8 years of age and he went to live with his grandfather who also soon after passed away. He had to drop out of school because he did not have the money to pay for a uniform and other school fees. He went to live with his brother. He said that this was a very painful period in his life because he really did not have any hope or dreams for the future. Like Martida, he was unemployed, barely making ends meet; subsisting. In 2014, he heard about the YiA program through his local chief. He along with another 100 youth applied, only 21 were selected and eventually only 11 completed the program. He said he knew that this was his chance to do something. He saw the potential immediately. When I asked him why he had decided to train as a bricklayer instead of choosing the entrepreneurship pathway, most popular choice for the youth who want to have some capital to start their business, he said: "I did not want to risk it. I knew that I could take the money given by the program and try to start a business but it might fail and I was not willing to take that chance". He wanted a skill that he could keep even after the program ended. Well he chose well. He spent 4 months at a vocational school where he learned how to draw, design, read house drawings and then frame and build them. He has never looked back. Over the past year, he built a house for himself and his brother, and has built a number of houses in the community, including his latest government commissioned house. He already has over 2,000 Kwacha (\$2.7 CAD) in savings, a huge amount for him. I asked what he had done with the money he got for his first job. I imagined that he would say, that he bought running shoes or clothing, instead he said that he had bought fertilizer because the small plot of land he and his brother live on needed it for increasing their crop yield.

The internal drive of these two youth, their desire to better themselves and their families is not something that YiA program gives youth, these are inherent qualities of these two amazing youth, part of who they are and what they want to be. What the program has given them is a leg up, a small opportunity to tap into their own dreams and to make those happen with their own hard work. The story of Martida and Never is not unique. They are not an exception. Over the week, I met many other young people, whose stories are similar and whose lives have been transformed in ways we cannot even imagine. The power of being able to dream of something better is the best gift and legacy of the YiA program.