

Hello from Tanzania!

Latest News from Heather Johnstone our CMS Link Missionary in Musoma

I was reflecting on some of my much-loved moments over the last year in Tanzania when “My Favourite Things” from *The Sound of Music* popped into my head, and like all good earworms, the song dug right in and played on repeat in my head. “Raindrops on roses, whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens” might be right up there for Maria but they are not my favourite things, especially not in my current context.

Like Maria I want to share with you some of the things that have warmed my heart over the past 12 months – my first year as a mission partner.

But where to begin – my list is long! I love The Rehema Project and my job; I love my colleagues and I love that God has placed me here. I’ll admit that at times it is challenging and can be frustrating but overall, the fact is I have so many favourite moments that I must be ruthless with my selection.

Mama Rehema

I am commonly known as ‘Mama Rehema’ and in my role as ‘mother of the Rehema employees’, not only do I get to work and worship with this diverse group of beautiful, God-fearing women but I get to share life’s ups and downs with them. This includes going to weddings with them, rejoicing the birth of a new baby with them, going to funerals with them – I get to celebrate with them, to mourn with them, I get to live life with them. They are my family and I love them.

Honoured and humbled

Usually when a baby is born it is given a name of one of its grandparents or parents so it was both a great surprise as well as a huge honour when Anna named her baby “Kenneth” after my father who had passed away the previous month. He is a bonnie baby and I get to have daily cuddles with him which is a definite perk of the job. A similar honour was bestowed on me again last month when our gardener named his daughter “Heather”. She is the sweetest little ray of sunshine and would melt your heart. I am humbled by their generosity.

Education

I mentioned the nursery school in Nyambeshe in my last letter. It continues to be a success and formula for putting an instant smile on your face when you step into the classroom. It is sad, however, that many of the parents struggle to pay the nominal, and subsidised, fees. The strain is largely due to the drought which has been a real problem in the area where subsistence farming is prevalent.

I recently started both literacy and English lessons for the Rehema staff. Some of them have never benefitted from a day’s schooling in their lives and they are loving learning how to read and write. Attendance is voluntary and they come in on their day off, so it is a real joy to see such a positive attendance rate, to see their progress and how much fun they are having whilst learning in a safe and non-critical environment.

I offered English lessons as an optional extra not wanting to impose my language on anyone but the enthusiasm has been amazing. In fact we’ve split the class in two and now have a basic and an intermediate level class. Learning through song is a big hit and last week you would have heard “head and shoulders, knees and toes” emanating from one area and “London’s Burning” from another!

Celebrations

Tanzanian culture is a very respectful one and the ladies who work in the café have taken that concept, expanded it and begun a beautiful tradition. They spent the last eight months celebrating the lives of their colleagues’ parents. Each month they travel to the home of the parents of one of their colleagues for the weekend where they spoil and honour them. A huge party is planned and extended family, friends and neighbours all invited. I am privileged to have attended the past three celebrations. They treat the parents as if they are royalty for the day.

In December, Rehema holds a Christmas fair which is very popular with our customers and usually generates good income for the project. In 2016, for the first time, I wanted to do something for the children and staff to thank the ladies for their hard work over the year. We held a Christmas party that proved to be the highlight of the year! It was held on a Monday when we are closed to customers. The café was taken over by 50+ mini guests and their mothers. They played games, sang, danced, made crafts, did colouring in, won prizes, had a slap up meal (beans and rice) and a soda each and generally had a fabulous time. Such joy! God willing I would like to do it again in 2017.

Servant Hearts

My friend Zachariah is a pastor with the Anglican Church and his wife, Esther, works for Rehema. His mother sadly passed away recently. Funerals and grieving are a very important part of Tanzanian life and culture. When someone dies family and friends will arrive 'en masse' at your home to pay their respects to the deceased and to grieve. It is expected that you provide chai and food, somewhere to sleep, to sit etc. for all the visitors for as long as they are in your home (which could be days). This responsibility fell to seven-month pregnant Esther! We were supposed to be starting literacy lessons at Rehema on the day of the funeral so we rang around to tell everyone to go to Zechariah and Esther's home in Songambebe to commiserate with them instead. When we arrived Esther was slaving away over hot fires cooking rice and beans for hundreds of people and fetching water with next to no help. Without question the Rehema ladies rolled up their sleeves and helped her.

Once the food was prepared they all sat outside and sang hymns and worship songs for at least two hours in the blazing sun whilst everyone ate their food and waited for the service to start. I felt so proud to be associated with this servant-hearted and loving group of Rehema employees who didn't ask questions but just got stuck in with the hard work and kept everyone entertained. They are a shining example of everything the Rehema project stands for.

Assistance

Rehema Assistance is our 'raison d'être' and aims to benefit women and children whose basic needs aren't met. Just last week a woman was referred to us. Her husband had died and she was struggling to look after their four children. We gave her money for food as they hadn't eaten for days and are currently discussing the possibility of giving a micro-loan and business skills training so she can become self-sufficient.

Of course there are no guarantees in life and there are many heart-breaking moments to counter the happy times. The good news is, however, that when times are bad, we know that there is a much better alternative than focussing on 'things'; instead we can turn our eyes for our problems to our Saviour and know that he will help us carry the load.

Love

Heather

PRAYER AND PRAISE

Give thanks for the education projects – the nursery school and literacy and English classes.

Give thanks for all the Rehema ladies and pray for them and their families.

Give thanks that the recent diocesan synod was marked with peace and unity and a desire to move forward after a difficult year.

Please pray for Amy, the founder of the Rehema Project and for her husband Jono and their children Lili, Isaac, Brie and Abe. She was recently diagnosed with cancer of the spine that has now spread. The prognosis is not good.

Please pray for Zechariah and Esther and their family as they grieve for his mother and his brother who died unexpectedly last week.