

# Building Healthcare Capacity in Malawi



In 2012, the Hamilton Family Health Team developed a partnership with the World University Services of Canada (WUSC) to enable up to two employees of the HFHT to volunteer in an African country each year. In exchange for use of employees' vacation time to work long, hard hours training others and treating patients in a third-world country, the HFHT and WUSC agreed to cover the cost of the expenses of those who volunteered.

The first person to participate in this program was the HFHT's finance manager, Jay Graydon, who travelled to Malawi and helped staff at St. Joseph's Hospital with their accounting system. Upon his return, Jay described his experience and the other profound needs that existed in the hospital with respect to accessing and managing medications. This sparked something inside HFHT pharmacy manager Antony Gagnon. "With my experience in pharmacy and software development and desire to volunteer abroad, I knew this was an opportunity I could not pass up," Antony recalls. Without further ado, Antony took the necessary training and in 2013 made his first trip to St. Joseph's Hospital in Malawi, Africa; a country he knew nothing about.

Upon his arrival, Antony's task was to develop an inventory management system for the hospital pharmacy and to find a source of narcotics for the palliative care unit. "We had to do all of this with no funding," he says. At the hospital, Antony met Vallan Jezman, who was working as a pharmacy technician. They hit it off right away. "He is a wonderful young man," says Antony of Jezman. Jezman and Antony, together with some other staff at the hospital, worked for three weeks on developing the skeleton of an inventory management system and implemented the most basic elements. At the very end of the trip, Antony made a chance encounter with a pharmacist from Médecins Sans Frontières and managed to find a source of narcotics for the palliative care program that was completely free! What a success!

About a year later, Antony heard some news from Jezman: he had been accepted to the pharmacy program of Rhodes University in South Africa. School was starting in only two months, and Jezman did not have any funds to cover his tuition, or any other costs for that matter. "He asked for my support to cover tuition fees, accommodations and other expenses for his four-year program. It was the 11th hour — this felt like another impossible task. But I didn't say no," Antony says. In less than one month, Antony and a family member, finance manager Jay Graydon and a few other colleagues managed to cover the costs of Jezman's first year of university. "What a life-changing event for him," says Antony.

In 2014, thanks to the continued generosity of Antony and his colleagues, Jezman's second year of university was funded. At this time, Antony decided to return to Malawi to visit St. Joseph's Hospital and continue his work with the hospital team. "I was ready to expand on the system that had already been implemented and to train the new pharmacy technician, Thoko," recalls Antony. Antony had kept in touch with the staff at the hospital and helped with the development of the inventory management system remotely, all the way from Canada. But he needed to be there in person to help propel things another step forward. Fortunately, at the time of his second trip in 2014, he was able to bring 12 used computers to Malawi with him. The HFHT's computer systems were being renewed, and the laptops were no longer of use to the organization. They would be of excellent use to the staff at St. Joseph's Hospital, where new computers were badly needed. In 2014, another successful trip to Malawi occurred without a hitch.

Since 2014, Antony has kept in touch with the hospital staff, and even more frequently with Jezman. "With the kind support and generosity of the HFHT pharmacists, Jay and a family member, year after year, we have been able to cover Jezman's tuition and other educational expenses," Antony says with glee. In spring 2018, Antony returned to Malawi for a third time. "I had the pleasure of seeing, in person, Jezman graduate as a pharmacist. Words cannot express how proud I was of him," he recalls. "Through all the struggles, Jezman had managed to follow through with his dream." As a condition of his scholarship, Jezman agreed to return to St. Joseph's Hospital to work as pharmacist for six years.

"This is a huge sacrifice," says Antony. "A pharmacist in Malawi earns only about \$300 per month. He could have earned about \$3,000 per month if he had stayed in South Africa."

Jezman has remained true to his word. After the graduation ceremony, Antony and Jezman flew back to Malawi and continued to work on their inventory software. Antony says thoughtfully, "As good as Jezman's intentions are, I realize how tempting it must be to move to another country and practice his new trade. In order to close the income gap, we have formed a new company, Malacana, to commercialize our software and sell to other countries in Africa." And so, Antony's and Jezman's adventure continues. It seems it is only a matter of time before they see each other again, ready to celebrate another success.

