

ALUMNUS FINDS ADVENTURE, COMMUNITY IN ZAMBIA

Interview with David Damberger

When did you graduate from U of C and with what degree?

I actually just graduated from the U of C this past December, with a Bachelor of Science in mechanical engineering and a business minor in entrepreneurship.

What made you join Engineers Without Borders?

dambergerI actually was the founder of Engineers Without Borders at the University of Calgary back in the summer of 2001 and have been the President of the Chapter in 2001/2002 and in 2003/2004.



What got me interested in Engineers Without Borders and human development were three things: The first was that I was trying to find more meaning within my degree and my profession. I wanted to feel that I was contributing to some of the biggest problems facing the world today.

The second reason was that I had recently learned about the Light up the World project going on at the University of Calgary with an engineering professor named Dr. Irvine-Halliday. I was inspired by how you could use the knowledge I was learning in school to actually make a difference in people's lives.

The third reason was that I hadn't had a girlfriend in over two years in engineering and I heard rumours that girls were more interested in social causes ... fortunately for EWB, not so much my dating life, the types of girls interested are all very dedicated to the cause and not as shallow as myself!

Can you explain the project and your role within it?

I am working as an Engineers Without Borders volunteer partnered with a locally established non-governmental organization (NGO) named International Development Enterprises (IDE). EWB always partners with organizations that are operated by local people because development is about building a country's ability to help themselves and reducing their dependency on outside organizations in the future. Local organizations have a much better understanding of the cultural contexts behind the work and the history in the area.

IDE's work revolves around helping poor Zambian farmers to improve their lives. Forty percent of Zambians are small-scale farmers (owning less than 1 hectare (100m x 100m of land), and therefore focusing on them is a major key to the country's development. Increasing crop yields for these farmers not only helps them in feeding their own families, but also helps them increase their income by selling their crops to the market and therefore increasing their economic freedom. IDE focuses on helping farmers gain access to affordable irrigation technology (like treadle pumps) that allows them to farm larger plots and increase their current yields.

However, providing farmers access to irrigation isn't the only thing that is going to solve the problem. The aim of my and IDE's work is to ensure everything can be handled locally, with less dependence on outside influence. This in turn is aimed at improving Zambia's local economy and Zambians' ability to solve their own problems.

IDE currently has their main office in Lusaka with 15 staff. This main office does all of the management and organizing of the projects throughout the country. There are then around eight field offices located all over Zambia, manned by one to four IDE staff, and partnered with our many partners who actually go out into the field and work with farmers.

The job that IDE has given me since I have arrived is to help restart one of their failing field offices. This office is located in a small community town named Choma. Choma is located in the southern province of Zambia and is about a two-hour drive north of the major city of Livingstone (home to the spectacular Victoria Falls). In

this office, I will be carrying out IDE's work in the surrounding rural areas, learning about the local situation and using my background and skills to aid farmers in improving their own lives.

What led you to the Zambia project? How long have you been there?

After spending the majority of my time (both inside and outside of school) volunteering with Engineers Without Borders for four years, as well as participating in a short-term volunteer placement with them in India, I have developed quite a passionate interest in learning about the disadvantages and vulnerabilities of specific groups of people in the world. I guess I entered into university with questions about what I was going to do with my life, assuming that after I graduated I would have been given the answer to what that thing was and also some tools to help me succeed in it. Unfortunately, after graduating from university, I still have not been given that answer. However, what I have been given is a realization that I don't need to choose just one thing to "do with my life," that I can do many things with my life, and that all university did was give me the tools to explore all those things and succeed in them. Going to Zambia with Engineers Without Borders is just one thing that I am going to do with my life and one that I will be able to learn a tremendous amount from.

I have currently been in Zambia for almost two months and I am not quite sure of how long I am going to be staying. From my last placement, I realized that the amount of positive impact you can have in only four months is quite limited, therefore, I am planning on staying here until I feel I have been able to contribute positively in a way that myself, EWB and the farmers I am working with are satisfied. In terms of numbers, for my mom and nana (grandmother), this means a year; for most other people I tentatively say one-and-a-half to two!

What is a typical day for you there?

Hah! Typical can be a very amusing word when you are talking about rural African life. I have had days where you get stopped in your tracks due to elephants knocking down trees along your driving path, rivers have flooded over what was supposed to be "the safest route to get there," village meetings abandoned because food

relief is being given out and it is way better to go to the meeting where they are giving out free food as opposed to gaining practical farming skills to help feed themselves. But here goes:

6:30 – 7:30am. Wake up and work on my demo-garden, which our office is going to use to illustrate to our farmers how to use the pumps and drip kits that we promote as well as better farming techniques.

7:30 – 8:00am. Take a bucket shower and make some maize-porridge with ground nuts and fruit (bananas and guavas this time of season) for breakfast.

8:00am – 5:00pm. Work. This usually consists of going to the office, doing some administrative work like writing reports for our head office or having meetings with partner NGOs and government officials. After this I head out into the field with some of our partners to either carry out community group meetings training the farmers, community assessment meetings where we are trying to learn useful information about the farmers or just individual meetings with client farmers or farmers interested in being involved in our program. These days usually involve very unexpected events such as the ones listed above causing a complete rearrangement of the originally planned events for the day.

5:00 – 5:30pm. Shopping and chores around the town. This usually involves bartering at the local city market with shop owners who at first think they can charge you a higher price because you are a Muzungu (white person), only for them to find out that I can speak some of the local language and I know that real prices so they can't trick me and they laugh.

5:30 – 6:30pm. I go for my evening run through the open bush outside of town. Kind of a time for myself where I can get away from things, think to myself and watch the sunset. However I do run into the occasional Zambian along the way who insists on joining me for a short time to see where I am running (of which I usually have no idea since I like to explore by finding new paths).

6:30 – 8:00pm. Cooking dinner, which almost always consists of the main staple here, Nsima (pronounced she-ma). It is just ground-up corn that is boiled until it becomes the consistency of mashed

potatoes. It is served with a vegetable sauce (usually onions, tomatoes and a green leaf such as pumpkin leaves), and then either beans or meat (chicken, beef, fish, local game meats).

8:00 – 10:00pm. I spend time doing local Zambian things helping me to integrate into the culture and understand local peoples lives. Whether this is going to my Tonga learning course (the local language here in Southern Zambia), visiting and chatting with friends, partaking in the local Nsolo board game, or whatever African cultural activity I can find (I am still looking to find a local drumming group that I can join).

10:00pm – 12:00am. Usually back in my small quarter reading or studying Tonga. I am usually quite a night owl so bed time for me is quite late.

Have you seen progress in your project? How does that feel?

I have seen traces of progress since I have arrived, but this is mainly due to the work of the many people working within IDE and the partners we are working with. Personally, I have been mainly just learning from all the very knowledgeable Zambians surrounding me and asking lots of questions. I learned from my past experience in India that the people here already have most of the answers and it is only my job to learn and maybe help facilitate some different ideas and perspectives that someone in their position wouldn't have access to (i.e. different pump design, different way of gathering information, different communication techniques).

I have met a number of the farmers who have greatly benefited from the pumps and surrounding programs. One such farmer, David Muungu, had doubled the amount of land he was able to grow crops on, quadruple the yield that he produced and therefore earn enough money to pay for the schooling of two more of his children, as well as invest in another pump for the next season. You can't help but get extremely energized when you meet people like this. It's moments like that which really reinforce why I am here.

How are people treating you?

The people in Zambia are extremely friendly and hospitable to me. The culture here is very relaxed, which at times can be frustrating if

you want something to be done in a reasonable amount of time, but once you adapt to the local timeframe it becomes quite nice. With EWB, we always try to live a life that is as close as possible to the people we are working with. We know that we will never truly understand what it feels like to be as vulnerable as they do since we will always have our health insurance and access to emergency money if something goes wrong, but we feel that by living in local conditions, eating local food, learning the local language and integrating as much as possible into the local culture, we can gain a strong understanding of some of the problems created by poverty and more importantly, earn the respect of the local people so that we can communicate effectively and solve some of these problems together.

What is the most satisfying part of the job?

Well, moments like the one described above are pretty satisfying. Stuffing myself full of Nsima is also pretty satisfying. I guess one thing that I really love is meeting all sorts of different people here in Zambia, learning about their lives, about their cultures and building trusting friendships that will last forever.

The most frustrating?

Sometimes I can get really frustrated with the complexity of the situations. There are so many different problems going on here that are so interlinked and propagate one another (i.e. poverty, HIV/AIDS, gender power imbalances) that I sometimes want to try and do something to deal with them all, but I then realize that I can only play one small role in these huge problems and that is tough to deal with. I also get frustrated with the lack of coordination of efforts going on in the country. There are a number of different groups working here to help, and yet many of them seem to just be doing their own thing without spending enough time coordinating their efforts, which could possibly make them that much more effective.

The lack of rain this year is another frustration. This rain is imperative for the large maize (corn) crop that most Zambians rely on for their food every year. This year, this severe drought has hit a large portion of the country, and they are predicting a shortage of food in the country surmounting to around 60 percent.

Something that is more sad than frustrating is that approximately 20 percent of the population is infected with HIV and AIDS. That means that one in five people I meet are infected with the disease. Most people don't disclose that they have the disease due to the social stigma surrounding the disease. Then, when the person gets sick, it is usually coupled with another disease such as tuberculosis or malaria, and again due to stigma, when the person dies it is said that they died of that disease instead of AIDS. The problem here with HIV/AIDS is very complex and I won't get into it here. But it really bothers me that there are people with whom I am building strong friendships here who are going to die before I leave...and I don't know who these people are.

What kind of support do you receive?

I am extremely lucky to have a very strong support network for my placement here. First of all, Engineers Without Borders provide an extremely timely and resourceful base to guide me along the way. I am in contact with them on the phone or e-mail bi-weekly, and they do an excellent job of not only addressing my concerns and questions, but they also push my thinking and work so that I am able to think more critically of my work here and improve as I go. This not only helps me, but it helps EWB learn more about how development is done and where we as an organization can play an effective role in development.

I also am very fortunate in that my project is linked directly with the University of Calgary chapter of Engineers Without Borders under our Working Partnerships Program. Under this program, the U of C chapter members are directly connected with my project. During a number of their weekly meetings, they are constantly updated with the project and undergo education modules that teach different development concepts using my project as a case study. Once in a while there is even a long distance conference call where they are able to ask me questions directly and hear me speak a little Tonga.

On top of this, Engineers Without Borders at the University of Calgary has a program set up called Sustainably Canadian, which they teach in the first-year engineering design course for three to six weeks. The purpose of this is so every single engineer who goes through the university gets some exposure to international

development and learns about the social importance that their future engineering will have on the world. This program has won national awards, and this year they are thinking of integrating a problem from my placement in the program. The details are still being worked out, but there is a possibility that I will have 600 young engineering students providing me with assistance from back home, which would be amazing!

When will this project be complete?

This question is a tough one because although our partner NGO always tries to have an exit strategy with our programs, the situation of poverty with rural people in Zambia is extremely deep and is not something that will go away in a few years. We try to have exit strategies with all the farmers that we work with so that they become self-sustained. For the foreseeable future, there is always going to be another farmer a few miles away who is living in a more remote area, with less access to water and less access to a transportation route to get their products to a market.

This allows me to bring up another important point about my work here. After I am able to develop a deeper understanding of the people here and our partner NGO, I will start to shift some of my working attention to building the capacity of the NGO to operate more effectively. This is more of a training approach so that once if I leave, the NGO (made up almost entirely of local Zambians) will be able to improve their work and therefore have a much larger and sustainable impact than if they had me there just working in one small area. The goal is to help the local NGO so they don't really have a great need for EWB volunteers, so EWB can focus our resources on working with the NGOs that do need our help.

What do you miss most about Calgary?

Well, my mother always said that my greatest asset in life is my strong group of friends and she couldn't be more right, as long as you add on my enormously supportive family as well. Just hanging out with my friends or spending quality time with my family are extremely important to me, and I miss them all dearly. I am also missing playing hockey and just doing some regular Calgary things like going to the mountains. Very fortunately though, those who know me well should be relieved to hear that here in Zambia, even

in my small town, they still have peanut butter! Which means that in all likelihood, I'm going to survive.