

I Bless the Rains Down in Africa
Brad Cooley, NHS Principal

Whether you live in one of the poorest countries on earth or one of the richest, one truth still remains – education matters, and so too, do our perspectives. Nothing drove those points home more clearly to our Norwalk High School students than hearing from our guest speakers, Shadreck and Yamikani Chikoti, from Malawi.

Shadreck is a prize-winning author, philanthropist, and public servant, and his wife, Yamikani, is an advocate for women and youth. They are revered in their native land for their efforts to raise money in order to feed and support the increasing number of Malawian orphans, many of whom are parentless as a result of the AIDS epidemic.

The devastating droughts that have ravaged their local crops in past years have only complicated the Chikotis' mission; a project that started in 2005 with feeding 125 orphans, and now, more than a decade later, is providing basic nutritional needs to over 1,000 children.

Malawi has some serious problems, some which seem almost incomprehensible to our students and staff – especially as we sat comfortably in the beautiful confines of the Ernsthausen Performing Arts Center listening to Shadreck's storytelling.

It wasn't all doom and gloom. The Chikotis spoke about their country's stunning natural landscape, from the crystal-clear waters of Lake Malawi to the ranging plateaus to the highest mountain, Sapitwa. Shadreck's words stirred up mental images of an outdoor adventurer's paradise.

Yet, one of the more powerful messages delivered by Shadreck and his wife was that human struggles and strife do little to detract from the spirit of every Malawian. The citizens are proud to be living in Malawi, referred to as the Warm Heart of Africa and known as one of the kindest countries in the world. They love to sing, and they love to dance. There is a saying in Malawi that if someone happened to step on a Malawian that he or she would first apologize for being in the way.

Now, for the real question – Why did I agree to host such an assembly at Norwalk High School? Why did I think that this time would be valuable enough to remove students from their regular classes for sixty minutes? I could have easily settled for a hypnotist, a magician, an escape artist, a guy who can spin 42 basketballs at the same time, or perhaps, have no one at all.

If you have students who attend Norwalk High School, ask them what they got from the assembly. Maybe it was the shock that girls in Malawi are not treated as well as boys, or even close for that matter. Maybe it was the astonishment that girls could be married off at fifteen years old to a man twice their age. Maybe it was the fact that young children have to create

their own fun, forming mud into their own toys. Maybe it was the part where they learned that education beyond the elementary years is a rarity. Maybe it was the paradoxical content about how people can live in squalor yet still find a way to smile. However the feedback gets reported to you, I presume that the words of gratitude spoken by our Malawian friends mattered.

For me, education and perspective are the biggest takeaways from Shadreck's address. He works with many children who beg to go to school and do not have the means. He works with schools where the privileged few are still seated on dirt floors. He works diligently to secure scholarships for girls and boys to send them away to better schools. He works with an agency who believes that education is fundamentally important to improving the quality of life in Malawi.

How great is it to live here in the United States? I think we all know, but at times, people seem to forget. Education is always available, whenever and however you want it, as long as you have a thirst for it. Careers and jobs are available, especially in this booming economy, as long as you have prepared yourself for them. Community service opportunities are accessible to all of us on a local and global scale when we have put ourselves in position to help others.

Sometimes it takes individuals from across the ocean, from another continent, to remind us and reinforce to us why our country, and our Norwalk community, is a blessed place. And for those of you who complain that we have no good restaurants, Shadreck clearly said that our FOOD is what makes America great.

Below: The Chikotis address the topic of leadership to our TLC class following their presentation to the student body.

