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A FOOTLOOSE AMERICAN FINDS HAPPINESS AS A ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLMARM

by Bowden Quinn

For 250 young Zimbabweans, many of them crippled in the seven-year guerrilla war for independence, Danhiko Secondary School is a ray of hope for a share in a peaceful future.

And for its American headmistress, 36-year-old Sharon Ladin, the school is a dream come true.

Born and raised in California, Ladin has spent much of her adult life wandering. She's taught school in England, tended bar in Ireland and worked in a sewing-machine factory in Montana. Along the way, she earned a doctorate in literature from the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Returning from a two-year trip to Southeast Asia, she visited Zimbabwe for the first time in 1980, just after the country gained independence with a democratically elected black government, after 14 years of white minority rule as the break-away colony of Rhodesia.

"I fell in love with the place," she recalled. "I only stayed two or three weeks, but I knew I'd come back. When I got back to the States, I didn't like any of the job offers I had, so I borrowed $2,500 from friends and returned."

She was confident she could find a job, though she had no idea what she would end up doing. Two days after her arrival, she met a Zimbabwean man who was trying to organize a school for ex-guerrillas in Salisbury, the capital. Since that moment, she has so thoroughly devoted herself to the school, she's hardly seen any of the country she fell in love with.

"I've only been out of the city a few times, and then I'm so exhausted I spend most of the time sleeping in the hotels," she said.

Education is a major concern of the Zimbabwean government in its task of building an egalitarian society. Thousands of young Zimbabweans interrupted their educations to join the guerrilla armies. Thousands more had to flee with their families to refugee camps. Many of those who remained in the rural areas had their educations halted as schools were closed during the war.

The Zimbabwe government also has to correct the inequitable educational system of the former Rhodesian government, which allowed statistically only 78 of every 1,000 black children to enter secondary school, while virtually all white children received secondary education.

The task is too big for the government to handle alone.

"The government can't afford to build all the schools it needs," Ladin said. "Anybody can put up a school. If it comes up to ministry (of education) requirements, they're more than happy to approve it."

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Because the need is so great, Danhiko isn't restricted to former freedom fighters. Only 125 of the students were combatants, but 108 of those are disabled. Ladin got the idea of concentrating on the injured soldiers after a visit to a rehabilitation camp near the school. She was struck by their enthusiastic response to her invitation to attend the school.

"They were amazed. They loved the idea. There were about 90 of them who signed up that first morning."

For several reasons, the ex-combatants have difficulties in government secondary schools. Many are much older than the regular students. Some have been away from school for six or more years and have forgotten much of what they learned. After being soldiers in a vicious guerrilla war, they have trouble adjusting to the role of a student. Only through the camaraderie they gained in the bush can they adapt to the discipline of the classroom.

"They wouldn't be here if they weren't together," Ladin said.

But as a group, they are exemplary students. Their desire to learn wins praise from all their teachers.

"In the beginning there was no public transport to the school, and it was really very moving to see them walking. Some would have to leave half an hour early, some an hour early. You'd see little clumps of them along the street hobbling to the school and hobbling back. It showed a dedication that I wanted to encourage," Ladin said.

None of Danhiko's students is seriously handicapped. Other than perhaps noticing an unusual number of youths with crutches, a visitor wouldn't detect anything exceptional about the students. Many of the injuries are invisible.

"Some of them were poisoned. They could be operating on one kidney," Ladin said. She doesn't know the nature or extent of the disabilities of most of her students.

One day she got angry at a particularly listless class and told the students they should leave if they didn't want to learn. Afterwards, a young man told her he was trying, but he found it hard to concentrate on what she said because of the other noises in his head.

"He's hearing things that we're not hearing. I don't know how long it's going to take to get over that."

The Zimbabwean who started the school has gone on to other projects, so Ladin is now in charge. She admits she has had difficulties because she is a woman and a foreigner, but she seems now to have the full support of the ministry of education.

The school is housed in a long, low building that used to be a dining hall serving migrant workers who lived in the surrounding dormitory blocks. The cubicle where Ladin's desk sits used to hold an oven.

A bare minimum of renovations made the building into a schoolhouse, through funding that included $3,200 from the U.S. Embassy's self-help fund, part of $355,000 the embassy has distributed to small self-help projects since independence.

Plywood partitions separate six classes of about 35 students each. Makeshift rooms house two other classes, including a special primary class, again because the need was so great Ladin felt she couldn't turn the applicants away.

She still spends much of her time fundraising. She has found enough money to obtain about two-thirds of the textbooks the school needs. She has nine teachers, counting herself, including two American volunteers. None of the teachers has a government-recognized teaching certificate, and most of the Zimbabwean teachers have only high school educations themselves. They tend to stay at the school for only a short period as they go on to continue their own educations.

The school offers only seven courses at all levels: English, Shona (the local language), math, general science, history, geography and accounting-bookkeeping. Ladin hopes to offer two or three more academic courses and a workshop for vocational and artistic crafts. The school offers no special assistance to the disabled students, who receive physical therapy at the rehabilitation camp where they live.

The students have unrealistically ambitious goals. Many want to go on to the university and become doctors and lawyers, though even those who get the equivalent of a high-school diploma will be among the fortunate few in their society. The disabled students are as earnest as the rest.

"They're very determined," Ladin said. "They know they can't do exactly the same jobs as the others. They can't do the hard physical work."

Ladin, too, remains determined in the face of daily obstacles. The local community wants the building back for a neighborhood project, so the school will have to move soon. Its future and Ladin's are uncertain, but promising.

"The whole story of this school is really just reacting to situations as they come up," she said. "That's what I like about it."

BELOW: Sharon Ladin talks with some of her students.

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