

## Women Building the Nation

One afternoon while preparing for the Global Women's Forum in Lusaka, Sharon (Sharry) Farrar and I focused on getting the meeting permission certification from the local District Minister (DM) and purchasing supplies for the event.

At the DM's Lusaka office, we discovered that Minister Charles Lumbe was "at his rural office with his constituents this week". Since no one else could sign the permission slip except the DM, we needed to find Minister Lumbe and obtain his signature. His secretary called him to say to expect us. She drew us a map to his country office.

On the drive through the farmland at the edge of Lusaka, we passed many people dressed in bright colors of reds, yellows and oranges that contrasted with the dark freshly turned soil. Most were weeding and clearing undergrowth under the hot sun. Our destination turned out to be a neatly groomed, white farmhouse, we later learned was built by a European farmer a generation earlier. Inside the front door, we entered a white hallway with mirror, slim table, coat and hat hooks as well as a well-worn reddish hall-runner rug, anchored by several straight waiting chairs.

The Honorable Charles Lumbe welcomed us and gestured for us to move to the right into the public office at his country home. I was struck by its neatness--by no means showy, but also not bureaucratically austere either. The major pieces in his office were a handsome dark wood desk and many bookcases with career mementos: a short-handled hoe, statues and framed pictures tastefully arranged among his books. President Kenneth Kaunda's photograph hung prominently on one of the white walls. Near his desk was a large map of his district.

He wasted no time getting down to business: "What can I do for you today?"

Sharry introduced us by handing him a file folder with our program intents, lists of project sites, places where Global Women's Forums had been held throughout the world and a colorful program, while I explained we were staff members of the Institute of Cultural Affairs, an organization focusing on community development and committed to empowering grassroots peoples in communities around the globe.

"I work out of Chicago and Sharry and her husband plus other staff members live and work in Zambia. This Global Women's Forum we want to hold in your district is a one-day event designed to encourage and support women's leadership in local development efforts." He listened and then took several moments to look over the information and slowly nodded his head.

As he signed the permission slip, he asked, "Have you met Gloria Kalima, Zambia's Secretary of Women's Work? She is an outstanding leader of women's training and development here in Zambia."

"We have been told that she is creating fine programs for Zambian women and we plan to see her this week, when her time permits. We simply haven't had time to make that appointment as yet."

“Well, let me assist you with that. When are you available? What about tomorrow?” he tossed out directly as he began dialing the phone. “She has a big meeting soon that she and her staff are planning up north in the Copperbelt Province.” He turned to the party on the line and said: “Good afternoon, this is District Minister Lumbe. I would like an appointment with the Secretary for two women who will be leading a women’s forum in my district . . . What time does she have available? . . . Two or three?” Mr. Lumbe looked at me and I nodded. “Okay, let’s make it for 2:00 tomorrow afternoon. Thank you very much.”

Immediately, we stood, thanked him, and shook his hand vigorously as he passed us our official meeting permission slip. The paper allowed us to hold a meeting with more than six participants in his district on the date, at the place set and signed by The Honorable Charles Lumbe. These small victories of permission slip plus an appointment with the Women’s Secretary catalyzed great energy in both of us, so much so, that we chattered non-stop during the drive back into Lusaka.

Off we hurried toward the downtown streets of Lusaka. With our list in hand, we purchased what we needed efficiently. As we exited the store and took several steps, we heard: “Leah . . . hey, Leah!”

“Did you hear that? Is someone calling my name? How in the world could that be?”

“Over there, across the street . . . the voice came from . . . Oh, there, it’s Oscar!”

“Hey, what’s up with you two?” he asked grinning and panting.

I explained that we had been out to The Honorable Minister Charles Lumbe’s country office to obtain a meeting permission slip.

“Yes, that’s part of the protocol here. Good job.”

“You will never guess with whom he made an appointment on our behalf.”

Sharry countered.

“Who—no wait, Secretary Kalima?” Oscar beamed!

“How did you guess?” I asked.

Oscar looked at me and winked, “Oh, I observed that you are good listeners and I believe that you two wouldn’t let that opportunity just slip by. Besides, if the forum proves as successful as we believe it will be, DM Lumbe will gain favor with Secretary Kalima, a very popular cabinet member in President Kenneth Kaunda’s government right now. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

“Well, thank you. We are excited about seeing her tomorrow afternoon. How about you—how’s your water conference?” I asked.

“I’ve learned a few really helpful things that I can use in my province; I’m already pleased I came and there are three more days to go. It’s great that we had this chance to check in with each other. Say, I’m meeting someone in 10 minutes, so I’ve got to run. But know, I wish you the best.”

“The feeling is mutual, Oscar,” Sharry said. “We hope to see you again soon!”

On the way back to the car, I couldn’t help but wonder: *What is it about these Zambians that makes them so likeable and so unforgettable? No doubt, the absence of the usual language barriers allows for connecting and building relationships--certainly more quickly than in India. The English language has been spoken in this area of Africa, now called Zambia, for more than a hundred years. Today, almost everyone here speaks English. Is that it? There must be more reasons, but what are they?*

At 2:00 the next afternoon Sharry and I arrived in the reception area of the office of Cabinet Secretary Gloria Kalima. The receptionist ushered us into her office. We exchanged warm introductions. As Sharry shared with her another file folder of information about the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) and the Global Women's Forum program, I observed Gloria Kalima in action. She was of average height, with a pleasantly round figure, dressed in a bright yellow and green dress with matching dramatic head wrap. Her liquid brown eyes danced and then focused intently on Sharry, as if she were the only thing that mattered. The Secretary appeared to be full of energy, confident and at ease in her own skin. Her sense of humor and delight, without a doubt, served her well while working with both women and men. Then, I felt her penetrating attention redirected toward me.

"India! A whole month in India? Oh my, you are brave!"

"Well, thank you for noticing." I quipped. "India is an amazing place." I explained to her that I spent most of my time facilitating women's events, listening and taking notes during conversations I had with mostly village women in Maharashtra State, where the capital of the country is located. Since leaving home four and a half weeks ago, a partner and I have facilitated 12 Global Women's Forums ranging in size from 14 to 72 participants and over 300 women in all.

"You must be tired!" she interjected.

"I have had a few tired moments, but forum days are wonderfully revitalizing. You understand what I mean. You have been among women and experienced their shared energies. It's refreshing."

"Tell me about these forums. What do you do?" Secretary Kalima leaned in closer. She took the forum program in hand, inspected its colorful cover with faces of women of all ages and races from around the Earth. She paused long enough to declare softly: "We are beautiful, aren't we? . . . Please continue."

Sharry began by pointing to the agenda in the program, "Here is a picture of the day. Notice this one-day event is divided into two parts: first the morning session: Today's Woman and Her World. It includes a short talk on how women are experiencing life today. And then secondly, in smaller workshop groups, we discern What the World Needs and Why. Finally we name underlying contradictions. These are serious conversations but not without lots participation and laughter."

"Then, we take a break," I added. "Gathering back, we sing a few songs and share lunch together. Still in that lunch configuration, we hold a group conversation that includes questions like: Who are the women who have impacted your life? What qualities do we associate with women that have stirred new life in others? Hopefully, the conversation allows each woman to claim her own council of supportive women. And perhaps, we experience the challenge of picking up their legacy as women."

Then together, Sharry and I described how the afternoon follows a similar structure as the morning: a talk, workshop and reflections on the day. During the afternoon, we focus on effective engagement, individual priorities and their relationship to our times and in the context of our world. How do we women participate? What values do we hold? How will we organize our efforts, sustain the work and celebrate project completions? Women create timelines and next steps and report out group work to the total gathering.

“In one day, participants cannot produce a full-fledged plan of engagement,” Sharry admitted, “but they can rethink priorities and pick up tools for planning and orchestrating future efforts. And they can meet a few new people that they may call on next week or the week after to join them in a common vision and/or task.”

“Yes, I can see this is a very helpful training event. Thank you for sharing these materials. May I call you later, Sharry. We may want to plan something together?”

“Sure, I’d like that. Leah and I have heard from several people who are excited about what you are doing with women. We understand you are having a women’s meeting very soon, aren’t you? What is the purpose of the meeting?”

The Secretary began describing the Kitwe Conference as an opportunity for women to report what they have accomplished toward Zambia’s 5-year priorities.

“Well, it’s helpful to know what we are really doing, don’t you agree? Yes, we women need to be given credit for the jobs we are accomplishing for our country. Delegates are coming from all 10 provinces and a few districts, also. I want this to be a well-documented reporting. Therefore, my assistant Godfrey and I created a form for all delegates to use in their individual reporting. They are to send us a copy prior to the meeting for creating a conference reporting file for all delegates. We’re trying in many ways to create baselines out of which more helpful women’s programs may be designed. And honestly, we just intend to celebrate what we do and who we are as Zambian women.”

“It sounds as if women will be heard and acknowledged for the work and leadership they have provided. It will also be a fine informal learning experience for those present.” Sharry added.

“I want it to be. Is there any chance you two could come? Oh, it doesn’t have to be for the whole two days, maybe only an hour or two—just to witness their work and bring your congratulations. That would be an unexpected surprise!”

Sharry and I looked at each other. Silent agreement hummed between us.

“We will be honored to attend. Let us check with our office here in Lusaka to be sure our schedule is cleared for our participation. We can get back to you or your assistant.” Sharry responded.

Gloria Kalima walked back to her desk and dialed her secretary, asking for Godfrey. Seconds later, the tallest and the blackest man in the universe walked into the office with a dignified demeanor. To myself I immediately noticed that *Godfrey looked like the Visa Official at the airport on the day of my arrival in Zambia. They must be brothers, cousins or at least close tribal relatives.*

The Secretary introduced us to Godfrey Miyande, her personal assistant. She continued to outline her plans, while Mr. Miyande made notes in his thick, leather notebook. “Godfrey will serve as your contact person for confirming when you will arrive at the conference center.” He presented his card.

“Secondly, when you arrive at the Copperbelt Conference Center--and I am counting on your being there,” she added with a wide grin, “Godfrey will meet you outside the conference center at the large wooden entrance doors.”

Suddenly lost in thought: *Humm, more doors!*

“If you need anything, don’t be bashful; let Godfrey know and he will make necessary arrangements. Are we good to go?” Secretary Kalima asked with a dazzling smile.

We thanked the Secretary and left her office with Mr. Miyande. He paused briefly to insist we call him Godfrey and he repeated that he would be expecting our call with the time of our arrival. With that, he dismissed us with a slow but regal nod.

Returning to home base, we spilled all our news excitedly. Ted Farrah, Sharry's husband, was tickled for us and immediately started thinking about how to get us to the conference center. It would be at least a three-hour trip by car north to Kitwe. He decided we could take an ICA car, but he insisted that he would be sure the vehicle was road worthy. He also needed to spend time acquainting us with "the car's unique idiosyncrasies". Not really understanding what all that meant, I nodded affirmatively.

Ted came through on Friday noon with his promises. After washing and vacuuming the car, he placed an igloo-type thermos of fresh water behind the driver's seat. And, he led us through a tutorial of sorts.

"Now, this is the way it is," he began soberly. "You always park this car on a hill," he paused and then smiled, "because you'll need that hill and its incline when starting it again."

*"Oh my, why am I not surprised?" I thought. Every ICA car that I had ever met--and I have personally known a few--suffered from some malady due too lean funds and neglect. Each car seemed to have its own "unique idiosyncrasies" but the results were the same. They ran cantankerously, at best!*

With Sharry steering and my pushing the vehicle on the passenger's side, we learned to hear Ted's "special moment of opportunity," when the motor might turn over. The timing was tricky, but after several tries, we proved we had it down.

"You must be off the road before sunset. I'm serious, Sharry. Got that? Remember--find the highest hill you can find before turning the engine off. You'll be fine."

*I couldn't tell if he repeated "You'll be fine." several more times for our sakes or his.*

"Call me when you get to the Howard's house this afternoon. Ted released us finally to our adventure.

Our eyes grew larger as we looked at each other soberly. I didn't know what we were getting ourselves into, but at that moment it didn't matter. I concentrated on our routine: increasing the car's rolling momentum; Sharry shifting gears; my running as hard as possible. To add a bit of drama and extra effort, I growled ferociously while leaping into the car, and slamming the door! We were off!

About an hour and a half later, "rivers of perspiration" as my grandmother called them, streamed down around my temples and ears, and dripped off my chin. Another dampness grew under my armpits and my wet back stuck to the car seat. It was HOT—so blazing hot, we could see thick air waves rising from the paved roadway. Sharry began slowing down.

"I think we need to stop, don't you? Ted told me that there was a rustic rest stop just beyond the next town. Let's keep an eye out for it . . . could be on the left side of the road."

Sure enough, we found the rest stop and a respectable hill as a bonus! While walking toward the structure, Sharry led the way.

"Sharry, what's on the back of your skirt?"

“Oh, my skirt is so wet from sweating that . . .” She twisted her skirt around to get a look at the bloody dampness. “Oh no,” she said softly, “I’ve started my period. Could you grab my overnight bag in the back seat? Here--the keys.”

By the time I carried her bag into the restroom, Sharry had her skirt off and was scrubbing it in one of the two sinks with cool running water. I cared quickly for my



A political map of Zambia: Note the 10 provinces and the two-lane road from Lusaka north to Kitwe in the Copperbelt Province.

own rest stop needs and then swapped places with Sharry, taking my turn at scrubbing the stain. While she made necessary changes, I squeezed the water out of the skirt and popped it several times in the air. Refreshing tiny droplets of clear, water splattered the air and floor. The skirt might dry in less than an hour in this heat. So, Sharry put the skirt back on, clean but still wet.

With no words between us, we readied ourselves for our late afternoon drive to British missionary friends of the Farrar family, who had invited us to overnight at their home not far from the conference center. Returning to the car on the little hill, we made a slick, well-practiced exit back onto the roadway. We were getting good at this!

Then I glanced at the remarkable woman I sat beside. *Over the last week, I'd grown to appreciate her ability to focus and deal with whatever was at hand with a positive attitude and a wealth of common sense. Yes, I was lucky to have her for a partner in this adventure.*

*Then pictures—lots of pictures—flooded my interior screens: Women on trips: all kinds of trips at various times in history and seasons . . . Important adventures: while moving out of Africa, migrant women heading North with babies wrapped and tied to their bodies. Some women slogging with their families through shallow seas for days. Floppy-bonnet-wearing women walking beside covered wagons with dreams of new lives in the Oregon territory. Others darting through France’s dark forests, hiding from soldiers. A stunned survivor making her way out of the rubble of Nagasaki. Like us these women quietly took care of the monthly--yet almost always unexpected--bloody flows.*

*There were no “Well, just take two Tylenol.” . . . “Drink this soothing cup of tea.” Nor was there time to take a short afternoon nap. No, not this afternoon, nor in all those billions of other moments. One of a woman’s jobs has been forever to quickly care for herself, the seed bed of the future, and move on.*

As the sun fell low on the horizon, the Howells, Episcopal missionaries married 25 years and living mostly in Africa during all that time, fed us well. He proved to be an expert on the outside grill, while she served as an event coordinator with a flare. They charmed us with some of their own stories of earlier days in Africa. We fell into our beds like boulders that evening and left the cordial couple sooner than we wanted, but certainly prepared for the surprises ahead in this adventure of a lifetime.

Sharry and I were in the parking lot of the Conference Center of the Copperbelt 30 minutes early. The building had been built relatively recently from trees grown in Zambia. Its modern style contrasted significantly from the buildings constructed during British colony days, in that little to no exterior stucco had been used in its construction. The center’s golden-wood outer structure seemed to have grown up and out of a deep, tree-filled canyon. Its parking lot, normally adequate for events held at the conference center, over-flowed with cars on this day. After numerous turns through the parking lot as well as hill inventories, we finally settled at the edge of the lot against tall greenery and on a pitifully small pile of dirt. The location was not ideal for our take-off, but we would simply deal with that maneuver later. Neither of us dared to keep Godfrey waiting.

Waiting, he was. A big smile widened across his face, when he caught sight of us making our way through rows of parked cars. He asked us about our trip to Kitwe from Lusaka before getting down to business. He reviewed what had happened so far at the conference. Then he walked through how we would proceed through a hallway to the stage. Chairs were arranged for us on the stage with several other women, also guests of Secretary Kalima.

“After a break the delegates are on now, the group will finish the last of the provincial reports.” Godfrey checked his watch, “Then Secretary Kalima will introduce her guests; they will respond. You, Leah, then you Sharry and lastly your associate. Your associate is already in place.”

Sharry and I looked at each other, wondering what associate?

As I approached the stage, I wished we had orchestrated this event a bit more. We should have asked Secretary Kalima directly what she wanted us to say and do. We had invested all our energies into just physically getting here. Now, the reason for making the trip loomed before us.

The event unfolded just as Godfrey Miyande had projected. And sure enough, on the stage, we found our associate Marianne Mann. She had been sent to Africa due to concerns by staff in Chicago that I had not made it out of India before an airport workers' strike and airport closure had been staged in India's capital. Marianne was calm and smiling, but of course, she was unsure of what was happening by whom, when or why. We exchanged only a few words before the final few reports started.

A Zambian woman stood at audience level near a table. She announced the number of chickens, goats, cows, pigs, pigeons and human beings, male and female, born in her province that year. She paused briefly and the audience cheered and clapped. She then read the amounts in acres of crops planted and harvested, as in tons of maize, tobacco, bushels of fresh vegetables, bags of peanuts, corn, etc. A second round of cheering and chapping erupted. Next came her accounting of projects toward the country's 5-year objectives. Most surprising to me were the numbers of trees, well over 5,000, planted in her province to raise the water table. A really enthusiastic response came from the audience for these efforts and successes. Several other delegates followed with similar sounding reports with different numbers and projects and the enthusiastic responses continued for the women's work in each province.

With the reports finalized, the Secretary received all the women's report folders and hard work.

"Today we acknowledge work that has been successful and even work that has failed. Failures become new understandings for next year's work," the Secretary insisted. This time she led the applause.

Madame Gloria Kalima beamed at the all-female audience as she called the few of us on the stage "a special treat" in her introductions. She was radiant today in a turquoise print, long-skirted dress and matching head scarf. A thought raced across my consciousness: *She embodies her name; she is glorious!*

Now at the podium, I looked out to see anticipation on sober as well as smiling faces—more faces than I had imagined, maybe 150 to 200 women and all eager for the promised "special treat".

The moment was full and ripe with possibilities. What flowed out of my mouth effortlessly was, "What a wonderful time in history to be a woman!"

Women exploded out of their seats! And in all directions! They waved their arms in the air, twisted and waved to a high-pitched trilling that seemed to roll up and down the aisles. Some women threw their heads back and released ecstatic shouts. Others bobbed up and down, dipped low and then sprang into the air. This went on for I don't know how long, while I curled my tongue this way and that way to create similar trilling sounds. Slowly the trilling faded as all participants returned to their seats. We all took deep breaths.

"I'm really glad that you agree with me," I responded, and we all burst into laughter together. I stammered: "I bring greetings to you from village women of India, who are also concerned about improving their crops, are learning as teams how to drill their own water wells and have created co-ops for bringing electricity into their homes."

They clapped for their Indian sisters and leaned in for more. My "more" was not all that significant or exciting, really. What I said hardly mattered. What mattered was



that some force had brought us together and the moment was full of wonder and joy for just being who we were . . . women.

“What I like about living in our time is that you and I have opportunities to become co-creators. We’ve made the team. Men and WOMEN—in this time are moving forward, creating together the future.”

I then introduced my partners: Sharry Farrar, a teacher at the International School of Lusaka, Zambia. and Marianne Mann, a Global Women’s Forum staff person from Chicago, Illinois. Each took her turn addressing the group. They each were poised, gracious and affirming of Zambian women and their accomplishments. These remarkable women leaders of Zambia received them exuberantly. Participants filled the auditorium with celebration. The three of us had never been received with such enthusiasm. The trilling continued!

The large group later mixed and mingled in conversations in a great room downstairs, while consuming tea and tiny sandwiches. This was a time of interchange, informal questioning and intense listening in small chatty groups. At some point, I became aware of Godfrey standing quietly at my side.

“Pardon me, Leah. I’m reluctant to interrupt. Things are going so well, but I do want you and your party to have sufficient time to get back to Lusaka before dark, if that is your plan.”

“Thank you, Godfrey. That is our plan and you are right; we must be going soon. Thank you for your wonderful attention to details.”

I found Marianne and Sharry quickly and we said our good bye and thank-you to Secretary Gloria Kalima and Godfrey. She sent us out whispering: “You were just what we needed. It was perfect. Thank you for coming!”

We located our auto-beast on the pitiful pile of red dust on the last row of the parking lot. Sharry and I insisted that Marianne sit in the back seat and encourage us in our tasks. For several reasons, the routine did not work this time. I did not hear Ted’s moment of opportunity. Nor did the motor turnover. The pushing was harder without a substantial incline.

“Try it again.” Marianne yelled.

Suddenly, Godfrey stood in front of the car with his long arms stretched out, as if to block our exit or wrap the car in a huge hug.

“Pl-e-a-se, please, Leah get in the car!” he demanded firmly. With two loud snaps of his fingers, six young Zambian men burst through the bushes and pushed our car at a surprising clip until Sharry shifted gears and the motor roared. The young guys joined Godfrey in waving us off. How’s that for personal assisting?

What a day! During the three-hour drive back to Lusaka, we discussed and laughed about our day from every angle possible. We agreed that all woman needed a personal assistant like Godfrey! Why no telling what we could accomplish! We wondered: What might a Secretary of Women’s Work do in the United States? How could we begin to structure healthy and objective accountability at every level of our own society?

Hours later all three of us settled into a comfortable silence. My thoughts roamed freely.

*Celebrating so thoroughly being a woman required enormous energy and abandonment. This day far exceeded all of my previously designated “best days” put*

*together. Why it was as if even the deepest cells in my body had not missed the total belonging and acceptance, in which I--we, now treasured.*

Gradually, our high spirits began to wane, as they naturally do. Sharry, Marianne and I were not feeling like co-creators of the future then. No, we resembled rumped and spent warriors needing a few hours of regeneration on anything that resembled beds.

Several days later Marianne and I flew on to Nairobi for the last Global Women's Forums of this trip.

To myself I rehearsed: *Nairobi, Kenya will be different. Every place on this trek has turned out to be unique. It had been the people of a place that had richly seasoned these experiences for me. Having shared the marvelous openness and spirit of collaboration in Zambia, I began mulling over: Who will be the spirit people in Kenya? . . . and in other places where I will show up in the future?*

Today, I continue to look for and work with co-creators of the future. I've been fortunate in my searching. After all Oscar, Grace, Gloria and Godfrey have lived with me as life-long advisors for over 36 years.