

**"Most of us would have given up ...
... but the reason that we can't give up is because they don't"**

Letter from Kathleen Dowling, on working at Chimoza



"I expected to learn a lot from my experience visiting Chimoza. I knew I would be in a culture vastly different from what I'm used to, and would see things I had only read or heard about. I had seen pictures and videos of children living in desperate poverty, with the flies buzzing around their heads and their stomachs ballooning from hunger. So when we first pulled up to the school and we found hundreds (about 300 to be exact) children who looked healthy and happy, sitting in classrooms with four walls and a roof, I was thrilled. Oh, thank god, I thought, these children are in a much better situation than I thought.



The children we met, although shy at first, were energetic, smiling, and eager to become our friends. They sat attentively in class most of the time, but just like normal kids, could be rowdy and restless. These were not the faces of desperation I was expecting. So when we were first given a glimpse into the homes of two students through the eyes of our "film crew", I was shocked into the reality of the situation.



These kids have barely a roof over their heads and food to eat. They sleep on the cement floor of their tiny houses (shacks would be a better word), and brush their teeth with their fingers using charcoal dust and a little water for lack of toothbrushes and toothpaste. Some of them eat breakfast, some do not, and their supper is cooked on coal fires outside. I couldn't believe these were the same children we had been playing with. I had gotten so used to my surroundings, and the poverty visible from the window of our van driving to the school, and had somehow stopped myself from making the connection that the kids we play with live in the poverty we see from the road.

My first reaction was to feel guilty for what I have, and then I felt overwhelmed by the situation, imagining how many children in the world are in the same situation or worse. But then I thought about how the children are reacting to their own situation. They come to school every day laughing and smiling. The fact that they come to school at all is a small miracle. This is the most important thing I learned from them. They have an immense courage and enough wisdom (even at their ages!) that they can look beyond their situation, and realize that Chimoza is the key to breaking out of it. One girl I met walks an hour and a half every morning to school and the same distance home every afternoon. Most of us would have given up. Most of us who don't even live there want to give up because of the enormity of the problem. But the reason we can't give up is because they don't"

Kathleen is an alumni of the National Coalition of Girls Schools, and spent time in Africa, with the Q Fund, as a volunteer worker.