

Sydney Simumba – An Extraordinary Life

Born – Chitipa District, Malawi 24, 04, 1984

Died – Blantyre, Malawi 25, 02, 2022

Sydney Simumba died on 23 February 2022 aged 38, after a two and half year battle with cancer. He was by any measure a remarkable person. From growing up in a remote village in north-west Malawi, through his commitment to education, both his own and others, his vision, eloquence and charisma, he impacted the lives of many thousands. He lit up every room he entered and had an amazing ability to move seamlessly between different social and cultural contexts, from the moment he stepped into them.



Sydney had grown up in the Chitipa district of Malawi, close to the Zambian border in a small typical Malawian village of smallholdings and subsistence. His parents placed a high value on education, a basic requirement for progressing as universal free primary education didn't begin in Malawi until 2004 and to this day secondary education remains fee paying. Sydney proudly told me he was the first from his village to go to a "proper secondary school" as he called it. He didn't finish with grades good enough to get one of the tiny number of places at university; Malawi at the time had among the fewest university places per capital in the world.

After finishing school he moved to Nkhata Bay to find work and became involved, alongside his cousin Feston Singoyi in a project to start a new secondary school, called Kunyanja, in an area that desperately needed one. The proprietor of the new school, disappointed by the small number of children signing up decided to quit the process leaving Sydney, Feston and John, a third partner, as unpaid teachers, with a handful of children in a couple of rented rooms. It wasn't an auspicious start. It was at this moment that we met and our lives would become intertwined. A chance encounter on our honeymoon, took Mandy and I to see this nascent school, and we were truly inspired. Sydney, just 20 years old, was captivating. While much of Malawian education worked to a rote methodology – the teacher saying a fact, then asking a child to volunteer to stand and repeat the fact (a legacy of English colonial education model which had not developed) - Sydney, despite his lack of experience had an instinct for something else. We sat in his class and witnessed a communicator, someone who asked questions, engaged students in conversation, looked to inspire.

Sydney alongside his colleagues were committed to making a go of this school and they asked us to help build the first proper classroom. As the school developed over the next few years, Sydney and his colleagues worked tirelessly, often needing to be convinced to pay themselves sufficiently to eat and pay the basics. Over time he was clear that if the school was going to prosper and succeed, they, the teachers would need to develop themselves as well.

He retook his school leaving exams with the aim of reaching the university qualifying standard and earned a place at Catholic University in Blantyre, the far south of the country. Sydney was a bit daunted before starting university, telling me that he would stand out at a private university amongst the elite of Malawi society who could afford such a place. He needn't have worried; soon he was thriving.

One short story tells a picture of the journey Sydney was on – from his village childhood to the world. On a visit to the school in 2009 in Sydney's first year of university, he came up to meet me for a night in the capital, Lilongwe, before we flew home the next day. We met watching football in a bar in at the time maybe Malawi's most famous hotel – "I can't believe I'm here in the Lilongwe Hotel" he said (even though it was the annex bar and we were surrounded by other Malawians). That evening we shared a hotel room (in a small, very simple but nice hotel), and went out for dinner and had a glass of wine. These were all new experiences. Over dinner he asked if he could accompany us to the airport the next morning to see the aeroplanes; he hadn't seen them take off or land before.

Later that year he told me he would be running to be President of the Students Union. Of course it wouldn't be easy he said for a poor kid like him to be selected but a few friends thought he should have a go. Of course he won. Who wouldn't want to be represented by Sydney?

Some months later again he phoned me excitedly to tell me he would be returning to the Lilongwe Hotel, this time to present to a World Bank conference on access to higher education in sub-Saharan Africa, that was Sydney, that was his the journey.

I had the privilege of being at Sydney's university graduation in 2012. It was a wonderful occasion and he was clearly a star. He beamed and was justifiably incredibly proud of what had achieved. As the day ended a senior faculty member came up to Sydney and invited his to stay on at university as a junior professor, an incredible honour and opportunity. Sydney though didn't need to think about it twice. He explained that he was honoured but he had a vision and responsibilities back at the school and that's where he needed to go now.

The next few years Sydney settled back in to school life in Nkhata Bay. He was incredibly ambitious the school quickly grew from strength to strength, growing in numbers of children, quality of results, and reputation. There were huge numbers of challenges in a fragile environment but Sydney always had a plan – and the plan invariably ending up working. He was incredibly proud when the first student from the school qualified for Government University after a few years. That turned into a trickle and then a flood. Today there are over 80 who have gone on to university and that number will grow massively every year.

Once Feston had returned from his time at university, Sydney was restless to continue to grow. He wanted to do a masters degree. He won a prestigious scholarship to study in Japan at Hisroshima University. Now he needed a passport, and he would start to explore the world as he longed to. Like everywhere Sydney managed to find his new way in this brand new culture. He bonded with fellow students from around the world, learned Japanese and tried new foods (he didn't like sushi!). It was Sydney's first experience of being in a racial minority, he did find that strange, and uncomfortable, as he did the ritual and formality of the life he experienced there. He took the opportunity of being in Japan to fulfil a longstanding wish to come stay with us in England. It was an incredibly special visit. In truth we were excited but a little nervous. The vast material differences in our lives had always been only visible on one side of the relationship. How would Sydney feel walking into our home and our relative affluence. Of course it was a non-issue. From the first evening sat round our kitchen table it was as if he had been there 100 times. His visit meant a lot to Sydney, being in the UK, seeing the sites, meeting donors who he typically wowed, our Rabbi, which to Sydney a man of great faith meant a lot.

He also visited 4 schools on his visit. Again his amazing perspective shone through. It would have been easy to see the schools here, and the resources they had and conclude that there was nothing

meaningful to learn for his resource poor context. That's not how he saw it; to him the fundamentals, inspiring and connecting with children, building curricula, successfully engaging parents, moral leadership were all universal challenges to think about, applicable whatever resources a school had.

About a year later I received the fateful text, "I'm dying". Sydney had gone to a hospital in Tanzania about a pain in his leg he had started to notice nearly a year earlier, which the local hospital in Malawi had been unconcerned about. A scan revealed a tumour, and for most Malawians I would learn such a diagnosis was terminal; there is barely any cancer care in the country. Sydney took the brave decision to go to Cape Town to try and be treated. Unfortunately it would prove too late.-

When Sydney managed to get back to Malawi in the early months of Covid he was doing reasonably well. Although always now managing some health issues he threw himself back into the challenges; he wanted the school to lead efforts in the community around covid 19; he wanted to think about the next opportunities for the school.

Sydney had huge ambitions, first classrooms, then a library, electricity and running water for the school and surrounding villages, a science lab, a school hall, a girls dorm, income generation , most recently a clinic and a teacher training college, his latest vision that we discussing only weeks ago, ultimately Kunyanja University of Malawi, or KUM as "semi jokingly" called it. I have no doubt one day he could have been Malawi's Minister of Education and transformed the country. He believed in the power of politics to do good and hard, and his ambitions were that big.

But ultimately his responsibilities close to home were as important to him as his grand vision. In Malawi, people who earn money have the duty to help as many extended family members through education as possible. Sydney took that to extremes and as of recently has been supporting 25 people from his village to go to school; he wasn't earning anywhere near enough for that to be straightforward.

Everytime you walked through Nkhata Bay with Sydney he would be stopped by people who lives he had touched. He was completely adored and hugely respected with a wonderful smile and laugh often together with a distinctive downward hand clap. So far over 7000 children have been educated at Kunyanja School. Everyone one is his legacy. But so are the many those – the ripples will extend for years and generations, as more children are educated, more go on to university able to support their families and their country, all imbued with Sydney's spirit of warmth, kindness, passion and vision.

He leaves a very big hole.

His friend – Jason Strelitz

London 27.2.22