



The gift of knowledge

Greenwood couple shares farm wisdom with Zimbabwean villagers

by Dean Lesar

Matt and Maria Bendixen do not usually have someone perform a thank you song for them at the end of a workday. They did in Zimbabwe.

And there was a welcome song, too, when they first arrived in a small African village, and uncommon shows of respect and appreciation for the gift of agricultural knowledge they brought with them and shared with the subsistence farmers. The reception and gratitude they received was the Greenwood couple's payment for taking several weeks from their lives to help people who have had little contact from the outside world.

The Oct. 12-29 trip to Zimbabwe was the third outreach visit to a foreign country for Maria, a former Clark County UW-Extension dairy and livestock agent, and now the owner of Cowculations Consulting, a business that assists farmers with profitability and growth. She has also been to Kenya and Nicaragua.

This was the first overseas venture for Matt, a 17-year employee of Heartland Co-op/River Country Co-op. His specialty is in animal nutrition and forage production, and he heard enough about his wife's previous trips that he wanted to see for himself what it was like.

"I just said, if that's such a good program that you think you should go again, maybe there's something I'm missing and I should join you," Matt said. "If she found it rewarding that she wanted to go again, I wanted to know what in the world it could be."

Almost 10 years removed from her Kenya experience, Maria did want to go again, for what she says is an experience

that helps her re-set her views on how things should be done. Working with people who approach life with simplicity and necessity reminds her, Maria said, about how easy it is to do things just because that's the way they've always been done.

As the Bendixens researched a trip through the Farmer to Farmer program that uses various funding sources to send U.S. farm experts to other countries to help boost agriculture production,

they first had their eyes focused on Malawi. Instead, their particular areas of expertise would be better suited for Africa, they were told.

"They thought our skillset would be more useful in Zimbabwe," Matt said.

That skillset includes Matt's knowledge of feed ration balancing to promote animal growth and production, and Maria's familiarity with managing farm finances to focus on what's most profitable. That combined knowledge, Farmer to Farmer officials decided, are just what the folks in a small Zimbabwe village could use.

As Maria already knew and Matt would soon come to realize, there really is no way to prepare to go to an impoverished place. The Bendixens were assigned to work with a group of about 60 subsistence farmers who each work three or four acres to grow enough crops to feed a family and some livestock. Each farmer has a few head of cattle, a few goats, and some chickens. On their arid land, they try to grow maize, ground nuts and a soybean-like plant called lablab. With no running water, villagers make daily treks on foot to fill 5-gallon jugs from a community well.

Please see Zimbabwe, page 4

Page 4 - Tribune Record Gleaner - Wednesday, December 18, 2019

Zimbabwe, from page 1

The Bendizens were sheltered in a small town that was "a miserable drive" of two hours each way, each day. They were on the dusty trail by 7 a.m., and the villagers would walk to the site to meet with them. On the first day, Matt said, they were greeted by a vigorous welcome song from the villagers, and then expected to deliver knowledge from America even though they had not had any chance to learn of what was being done.

"Literally, they put us in a tent and said, 'Start teaching,'" Matt said. "Everything I learned about how they farmed I learned through the car window."

The tent was hot, the Bendixens said, and they had to adjust to speaking through an interpreter. That made it cumbersome to speak, they said, and then wait for the interpreter to translate without losing their train of thought. It was at first a learning experience for both sides.

"You've just gotta try to see where they're at," Matt said. "It's different, but it's not difficult. You have to just try to hear from them what they think their needs are. My goal with them was very basic."

Matt's job was to show the villagers how to get the most out of the limited feed options they have for their livestock. During the dry season when no crops can be grown — which is when the Bendixens were there — the

livestock is fed a bare ration of poor quality stored feed. For example, the people eat the maize that is grown, and the cattle get what's left.

"They feed the cattle an empty stalk," Matt said. "It keeps them alive, but they're not going to grow."

Matt tried to tell the villagers that cattle need fodder equal to 2 percent of their body weight each day to stay healthy during the dry season. Simply teaching the villagers how much that is was a task.

"They thought a 3-kilo bundle of feed weighed eight kilos because they'd never seen it weighed before," Matt said.

Simple tradition was an obstacle to overcome in helping the farmers modernize. They are farming the way generations have before them, and have been shown no other way.

"They've been doing the same thing for many years, if not a couple hundred years," Matt said. "What they're doing has gotten them by for a very long time."

The Zimbabwean farmers do get fairly generous government subsidies, but not on crops or livestock that they sell. Instead, they receive inputs such as seeds and fertilizer, but little direction on how to maximize their potential. Some veterinary care also comes from the government, but at minimal levels.

"They try to do a lot of stuff on their own," Matt said. For example, the villagers routinely treat their cattle for parasites by adding chemicals to a pond and pushing them through the water.

"They really take that quite seriously," Matt said. "Every few weeks they're pounding those animals through a dip tank."

While Matt was educating the farmers about ways to have healthier animals, Maria was expanding their horizons on what they can do with those animals to improve their lives. Most of what they raise is consumed within their own family or village, or perhaps sold at a roadside market. Maria worked with them on thinking of new places to sell spare crops, or animals. Selling eggs to a school or restaurant might be a better option that could bring in a bit more money.

Maria said she tried to inspire the idea of "shifting the train of thought from just feeding my family to marketing outside the community.



Matt and Maria Bendixen of Greenwood take a group "selfie" with the people in Zimbabwe with whom they worked in October to help improve their farming techniques and prosperity.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

"I asked them to think about which enterprise was most profitable. Maybe get rid of things that aren't making you money. Their poultry has a lot of potential."

Cultural norms are a hindrance to expanding the villagers' economic prospects. While a cow in good condition could be worth the equivalent of maybe \$500, Maria said, "They don't like to sell cattle. It's something that's more of a status symbol for them."

Matt said cattle are almost like a savings account for farmers. They only sell them when in desperate need, because having a decent herd brings a higher status. Cows are valuable in the Zimbabwe society, in multiple ways.

"If you want a wife, you have to have 10 cows," Matt said of the ancient dowry system still in practice.

Having money itself can be a problem, too. A cow is a farmer's prized possession, but if he sells the animal for cash, it's not his to keep.

"It's a very communal kind of place," Matt said. "If I have cash, I'm expected to share it."

That's the main reason farmers make efforts not to have money. They would rather barter for what they need through exchanges of goods.

"We don't want money," Maria said of the farmers' approach. "We want things. We want cattle. We want feed."

Maria said a few-week trip can only help so much, and her main goal was simply to plant a seed of thought in the village. If they are willing to try new approaches, she told them, they could have better lives.

"If we're only trading amongst ourselves, we never get any richer," she said. "They've never thought of it in that aspect."

The Farmer to Farmer project covered air fare and expenses for the Bendixens, but there is no monetary reward for this sort of trip. Neither Maria nor Matt wanted any, it's the opportunity to gain a new perspective on life that was their recompense.

Matt said he was struck by the villagers' high spirits, even in conditions that most anyone from the U.S. would find primitive.

"Nobody has power during the day and yet you don't see people getting down about it," he said. "They have work-arounds for everything. They know they'll get it figured out somehow. In the midst of all that, they have a pretty upbeat attitude. They just kind of seem to roll with anything life or their government throws their way. It took a couple

days to come full circle on all those observations."

Maria said she saw again during her third foreign aid trip that it is not necessarily the high-tech countries that have it all figured out. In going to places where people do what they need just to survive, she said it helps her re-set her own approach to life.

"The reason I make these trips is because it makes me think of all the things we do in farming here because we've always done it," Maria said. "You don't think about it, because it's something we always do. It helps me open my mind to doing things here that are just not productive ... It just kind of re-sets your thinking. It keeps you fresh."

Matt said it was a special experience for him to know that he could deliver the gift of knowledge and possibly a better life to a group of people who aren't given much. The community had to apply to receive the Farmer to Farmer visit and was thrilled to receive

the gift.

"When they found out, they were pretty happy," Matt said. "We were able to get them a lot of things they were wanting."

Inviting the foreigners in to help them is a sign the villagers want to move forward in their ways.

"They are starting to get generations that have been exposed to technology and the larger world and they want to be a part of it," Matt said. "They wanted us there. They want to improve. That was a genuine desire on their part. I found that very rewarding."

Matt and Maria said they were paid back almost daily in the villagers' sincere and energetic thank-you song. As their car would pull away each day, the villagers would walk along behind them singing and clapping.

"The experience I had with these villagers was really neat," Matt said. "I've never been treated with more respect than when we were saying goodbyes and when the village elder spoke to us. 'I couldn't shake the feeling that they just felt somebody cared. It was knowledge, but it was also somebody cared, and they appreciated that.'"



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Matt Bendixen checks the condition of cattle in Zimbabwe. Animals there are mostly underfed, especially during the African dry season.