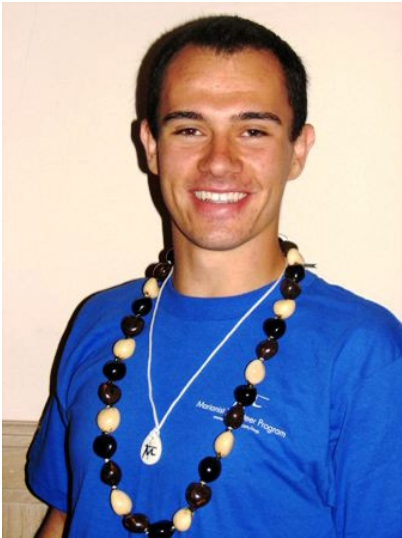


Interview with Marianist Volunteer Andy Taube



Andy is from Chicago and grew up on the south side of the city with four brothers. He attended St. Rita of Cascia High School. After graduation from St. Rita, he attended the University of Dayton, where he was involved with campus ministry, the Center for Social Concern, the University of Dayton Summer Appalachia Program (UDSAP), the Embers Lay Marianist Community and several other organizations and events. He studied psychology and intends to pursue a career in guidance counseling. Andy loves being physically active and is ecstatic about his placement in Karonga, Malawi, to volunteer at Chaminade Secondary School and MIRACLE.

Q. What have been your greatest challenges in adjusting to life in Karonga, Malawi?

A. In terms of my experience here, my biggest challenge thus far has been the conflict between my desire to be immersed in this culture and the privilege that prevents me from being with the people. Malawi is an extremely poor country. The vast majority of people here survive on subsistent farming. Those families often live in a one-room, clay and straw hut, without electricity, and rarely even see money. In contrast, as a volunteer here, I've inherited a massive home built of cement, brick, glass, and steel, with more electrical outlets than I can count, and a monthly stipend that surpasses most Malawian's yearly incomes. With all of these things, I cannot honestly say I will leave this place knowing what it is like to live as a Malawian. But at the same time, how willing am I to give these comforts up? Furthermore, though our house is very luxurious by Malawian standards, in U.S. terms, it was relatively cheap to build. So is it really that bad that we are making modest use of the resources we have available to us? I don't have answers for these questions.

It is true that my volunteer experience would be much more difficult here if I chose to adopt a more Malawian way of life, and the idea of doing that scares me. But I am challenged by the fact that the comfort in which I live is

dramatically distancing me from the poorest of the people here. In fact, even my placement as a volunteer separates me from the poor and marginalized of this society. A position as a teacher in a secondary school is an extremely elite position in this culture. Secondary school teachers make a very healthy salary, and their status commands respect from all members of society. While as a volunteer I am not earning a salary, my position as a teacher does earn an elevated status among the people here. This prevents me from relating with most people here on an equal plane. As if my whiteness, my education, and my American citizenship were not enough, my position as a teacher elevates me to a position where the poorest of the poor often seem scared to even look at me. It is true that I could seek out another volunteer placement, but I cannot rid myself of the privilege I have been granted throughout my life. My biggest challenge so far has been dealing with the separation between myself and the people here caused by the privileges I have been given my whole life. As firmly as I believe in the equality of our human family, the reality of the inequality created by our world is undeniable.

Q. What do you find most rewarding about your work?

A. While the position of privilege that I hold is extremely challenging, I have been able to find sources of joy in many places here. The students here are heavily committed to their studies. They realize how much opportunity lies in education, and they desire to make the most of that opportunity. It is uplifting to see their commitment. Also, Malawi is nicknamed "The Warm Heart of Africa." After being here for only a few months, I have no doubt what inspired that nickname: the people! The people I have met here, the ones with whom I work and interact on a daily basis, as well as the random strangers I meet in town or while traveling, are easily the warmest and friendliest people I have ever met. They welcome you and greet you with genuine smiles, and they are happy and excited to get to know you. Some would say that I've been lucky, and I've merely run into some well-spirited people. From what I've seen, though, I would disagree. This warm spirit is a part of the culture here. The people here truly believe that we are all family, and no matter where you go, all are welcomed to the table.

Q. How are you adjusting to community living?

A. This is not my first time living in community. I lived in several intentional communities throughout college including two Marianist Student Communities

and a community of volunteers during my involvement with the University of Dayton Summer Appalachia Program. In all of these experiences, including my current community experience, I have found many common elements to community living. There are always struggles, challenges, and disagreements. It's a part of living in community. Luckily, there also are always moments of relief, new opportunities and great support. Our community here is still developing, but I can already see that this experience will continue to form me, challenge me, and inspire me to be a better person.

Q. Has anything surprised you about your volunteer experience so far?

A. I don't think I have been surprised by too much. I was surprised by how long it took me to adjust physically and mentally to being so far from home. I'm also consistently surprised by how warm and welcoming the people of Malawi are. I'm surprised my body is adjusting to the heat so well; although, it has been entirely dry, so I might not handle the 100 plus temperatures so well once the humidity comes around. And though there are definitely some things that are very different from the U.S., I am surprised by how life isn't really all that different here in Africa, a place that so often gets projected as being a whole different world.

Q. What is a typical day like for you?

A. It involves many things and often ranges from day to day depending on how I want to use my free time. I generally wake up between 5:30-6 a.m., do some yoga stretching, prayers and meditation. I then take my time eating breakfast and will use the time in the morning to prepare for my classes, read a book or write some e-mails. On Mondays, Chaminade has a staff meeting for all teachers at 9 a.m., followed by an all-school assembly. I sometimes do a little work in our permaculture garden with Matt Meyers (another MVP volunteer) before the day warms up too much. Then our volunteer community has lunch at 12:30 p.m. each day. Most of my classes throughout the week are in the afternoon between 1:30 and 4 p.m. On the two days I teach at MIRACLE, I'll usually spend some time in the computer lab sending e-mails and posting blogs. If I'm not at MIRACLE, I'll use the afternoon to write e-mails and blogs, do work around the house or in the garden, play volleyball with the Chaminade students or prepare for classes. Our community eats dinner at 6:30 p.m. and then has various activities throughout the week in the evening. Monday nights we have our community business

meeting. Wednesday is the night we have dinner with the Marianist brothers here. Thursdays are our prayer nights. And Saturdays are our community nights. On other nights of the week, you may find us watching a movie or one of our favorite DVD TV series. I sometimes also use the evening to journal, e-mail and blog. (You can tell that staying in contact with my friends and family back home is a major priority through all my e-mailing and blogging.) Then on any given day, there may be a project around the house to do, some task to accomplish or some reason to go into town. Especially during this, my first term here, my schedule is very flexible. Next term, I will probably be assigned a few more classes to teach, and I'm hoping to get involved outside of Chaminade and MIRACLE in some way.