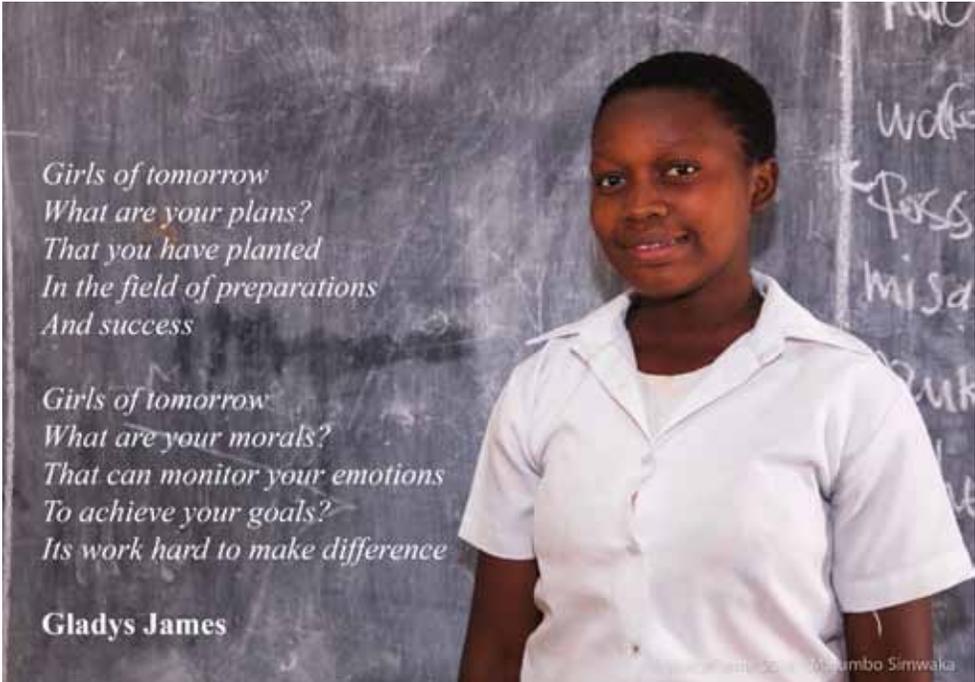




- Girls in Malawi
- Writing Clubs led by VoiceFlame Program Coordinator, Chikondi Lungizi Njawala





Writing workshop  
2016



1, 2, 3 Writing Clubs



23 girls at 2016 Writing Camp "Awakening Voices"  
at Mangochi, Lake Malawi



S.I. Diablo Vista first met Mary Tuchscherer when she came as a speaker to our club and shared her passion for developing a writing program that would benefit the women and girls in Malawi. She first became aware of the deep need in Malawi when she visited her friend and colleague, Masankho Banda. She worked with Masankho at JFK University and he invited her to come visit his country. She and her three traveling companions found that there were no books written by women of Malawi. Even the best educated women seemed shocked that their stories would be of interest to anyone. Some of the women Mary met held positions of power in the work place, maintained full responsibility for domestic life, and yet still struggle to be visible in a male dominated culture. The lack of the written accounts of their lives underscored their invisibility. On that visit she found that Malawi culture reinforces very distinct gender roles. That cultural distinction manifests itself in a disparity that favors males. For instance, most routine family tasks are performed by female children. Boys are given preference when a family can't afford to pay school tuition for all the children in the family. Therefore, three-quarters of literate persons within Malawi are men. Add to that disparity in education nearly a million people are infected with HIV/AIDS — which translates to over 10% of the adult population. Because of this, many young children are orphaned and forced to drop out of school to support their siblings.

Mary came back after that trip and started a non-profit, VoiceFlame, that works to support adolescent girls and women through a life-changing creative writing program. The method used, Amherst Writers & Artists (AWA), was founded over thirty years ago by Pat Schneider, author of *Writing Alone* and *With Others*, Oxford University Press. VoiceFlame's founder and Executive Director, Mary Tuchscherer is a certified facilitator and trainer in this method.

VoiceFlame has a vision to create a nation of confident, female writers and published authors in Malawi, Africa, where less than 11% of girls receive a secondary education, and less than a handful of females have ever been published. VoiceFlame's aim is to establish sustainable, locally led, writing programs in Malawi. The benefits for participants and trained facilitators include, but are not limited to:

- improved literacy,
- promotion of literature and the arts,
- elevation of the status of female authors,
- encouragement of self-expression, heightened leadership skills,
- increased self-esteem, and
- emotional and psychological healing.

It has been documented that girls who can read and write with confidence are more likely to marry later in life, will exercise better maternal health, and they are more likely to be able to support themselves.

As a result of VoiceFlame's writing programs the girls' outlook has changed significantly. They are more upbeat, their confidence increased and instead of:

- believing their only choice is to marry young, the girls begin articulating their own life goals.
- accepting the cultural role of female inferiority, the girls begin elevating their leadership skills.
- remaining silent about their dreams, the girls begin expressing their hopes and desires through writing and speaking them out loud.

The impacts from the program don't stop with the ability to read and write. The girls pay it forward in many ways:

- They teach family members and others to read and write. They share their knowledge with others helping them to appreciate that their potential is far greater than they imagined.
- Girls feel confident to take more prominent roles in small family businesses. Because they learned to stand in front of a group with confidence and recognized the value in speaking up, they are able to step forward and assist in the family business. In doing so, they are also learning to support themselves through entrepre

neurial skills.

- leading girls club efforts in mentoring peers to stay in school.

Impacts: Too often Malawi girls get married at a young age believing that it's an escape from poverty. Unfortunately that decision typically seals the girl into a life of poverty rather than provide an escape from it. Peer-to-peer mentoring, sponsored by girls clubs, is often a critical factor that helps tip the scales in keeping a girl in school or helps a drop-out return to school. The girl's unique musically-oriented outreach is inspiring. As one at-risk young woman noted, "seeing them singing and counseling me on the importance of staying in school worked for me."

When Mary explains VoiceFlame's impact on teen girls she says, "Imagine 'hearing' your voice for the first time and having it reflected back to you that what you said or wrote is good and strong. That's the moment when you realize that your words, voice, ideas, and actions have the power to affect change. I believe one of the primary things the girls get from becoming writers is that they realize they have potential. The girls discover promise and hope that goes beyond the everyday things they observe or are taught to believe. Living in poverty doesn't afford one the capacity to dream beyond survival. In fact, for many, there isn't even anything to reference dreaming about. Once they identify with something outside of the norm---being a writer for example---they have more capacity to dream."

It's important to know that Voice Flame's impact transcends adolescent girls. It touched Malawi women as well. As a result women who have been involved with VoiceFlame have independently started businesses as well as founded organizations that help women.

Mary has made several trips to Malawi since that first visit to Masankho Banda, taking with her students from JFK university and other women writers including SIDV member, Sue Hickman, who served on her board of directors as well.. She has conducted writing workshops and has trained native literate helpers who learned from her in the workshops to carry on the work with women and girls. SIDV has supported Mary's efforts, we have donated scholarship money to allow girls to attend Writing Camps and have put VoiceFlame in our Service Budget each year. Educating girls is a high priority project for our club.