

Foreign Flair



We thought it was fantastic that reader Lesley Yates gave so much of her time to such a heart warming project and thank her for sharing her experience and achievement with us.

"Issue 20 has just come through the door and I was so excited to see the new competition, Little Dresses for Africa, that I had to tell you of my recent experience in Malawi.

I went to Malawi in May with a group of nine, through a charity called Links International (www.linksinternational.co.uk) that works in developing countries with local churches or charities. We do a few days teaching on healthcare, microenterprise, youth work, skills and anything the local people would like help with. The people we teach then pass on what they have learnt to others.

Over two weeks the team worked in two different places. For a few days I was teaching some sewing skills in a rural village in tandem with a guy teaching how to start a business using these sewing skills. We taught seven ladies and three men from the local area, some couldn't read or write as they had never had any schooling. The group were half way through a three month session using some old manual sewing machines a charity had lent them, along with a teacher who was passing on what she had learnt at school. There were a couple of treadle machines, otherwise the group sat on the ground to use the

machines, with everything done outside, under an open structure with a grass roof.

After a couple of days of business teaching, we made a dress together, ready for the presentation on the last afternoon, so we had an afternoon and a morning to sew. Firstly, we measured a nearby child, and then I had to make a pattern. The dress had to be mid calf length, with sleeves and a collar. I drew the skirt and bodice straight onto the material with a pencil. There was only one table, and that was being used by the carpentry group, who were learning how to make a stool. So we used a treadle machine as a table, with the machine tucked inside, as best we could. Then it was time to end for the day.

When I got back to our guesthouse, I drew out the pattern on flipchart paper and did sleeves and a collar too. I can tell you that I prayed over the curves! I didn't have a ruler, so had to use the straight edge of my loose leaf binder, but I did have a tape measure and a pencil, plus marker pens for the final outline and, guess what, the electricity went off half way through, so no light! It all got done though. I am not trained in any of this, sewing is my hobby, and so I was flying by the seat of my pants.

The next morning we got on with cutting out the dress. Guess what, no pins, so we had to try and anchor the pattern onto the fabric using bits of brick that were lying around. Then the sewing, the worst thing was trying to get the tension correct on a couple of the machines. One of the men stitched the skirt, a lady gathered the sleeves by hand as they stitched, and they fitted in perfectly, a miracle! Someone else did the bodice, and put the zip in and so on. I encouraged the sewers to use French seams because the fabric frayed, and if they are going to sell their work the seams need to be neat.

It was all finished just in time for lunch, and ready to display during the afternoon presentation in front of lots of dignitaries. I hope to go back to Malawi in October to do more training and see how everyone is getting on."

