

## GREETING FROM TAMARA

I knew nothing about Madagascar, only that I would be living in a remote village without running water or electricity.

And thus, off I went, 22 years ago – leaving my job as a fashion stylist in New York City – in exchange for a two year volunteer assignment teaching health education in the African bush. I had no knowledge about African life (apart from what we always hear in the news; tales of hunger, poverty, and disease) or skills in healthcare (my degree was in German and Art History) but I was sure of one thing; I would make the world a better place.



**Tamara Hudson in 2000 as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Madagascar.**

I remember the shock I had when driving from the capital city Antananarivo towards our Peace Corps training center. The highway was buzzing with traffic, and every other vehicle seemed to be a huge white Land Cruiser (just like the one I was in) with an official looking logo on the door. USAID, UNDP, WFP, Medecins Sans Frontières... Our driver said they were “NGOs” non governmental organizations. I had never heard of such a thing. My education in Africa was just beginning.

When people ask where I was born, I sometimes say Madagascar, for indeed it is where I changed into the person I am today. I went in thinking I would teach Africans something, but it ended up being the other way around. The greatest lesson I learned was how to listen. Not to listen with my ears for answers I wanted to hear, but to listen to someone's heart by walking with them. In doing so, I stopped being an outsider, focused on my need to “do something good” and became instead a good neighbor, who shares what she has to give and receives with thanks all that she is given.



**My first studio in Balaka. Hand painted textiles.**

That said, I often forget how to listen when I am rushed, needing to meet a deadline, or excited to move on to a new project. The end becomes more important than the journey. We work with budgets, donors who want reports, and with limited amounts of time; contracts end, residency permits expire, or a project simply runs out of funds. Even when we want to slow down and listen, we cannot always avoid the clock ticking in the background.



**Planting trees in the community.**

I am lucky to have lived in Malawi for the past 19 years. Longer stays give us more time to walk with our neighbors and become a part of the community. Christina Beverin of Afrogarden, like me, has been here long enough to watch kids grow, and to earn the respect and trust of the elders. Eventually, we stop feeling like outsiders, and know that while we will always be from another place, we have found a new home.

Through the years, I have watched my Malawian friends expand their horizons through new experiences, further their level of education, hone new skills, and then turn these things into an improved standard of living. After working in my sewing studio, some went on to become teachers, police officers, business owners, or even live abroad. After helping me plant trees and learning to

harvest firewood in a sustainable way, many neighbors have taken an interest in planting and caring for trees on their homesteads. These achievements did not happen quickly, in the usual 2-3 year stay of an expat working on an NGO project. Real change takes much longer and results are seen when you are not waiting for them.

In the meantime, my understanding of the world has also grown, my skill set includes things I never knew I needed, and I have learned much about myself and what makes me truly happy.

Investing our time, listening, and sharing what we can give while also receiving with thanks what we are given, achieves something that cannot be measured with numbers in a final report. It's the on-going journey of a beautiful life which we start new each day, side by side with our neighbors.



**The literacy library at the re-forestation plot**