

The gift of freedom

How a simple cup is changing lives...

WORDS: Rhiane Kirkby

“I felt so privileged, so ignorant, so stupid and so Western. I’d lived and worked in Africa for so many years. I knew how impossibly hard it was to find tampons or any sanitary protection, but I never thought to consider what women there would use.”

That was then. Now, Widge Woolsey, from Bray, thinks about period poverty every single day. It’s her passion, her reason for being and true vocation in life. This shift in focus came about because, on a trip to Malawi, she befriended Nandi Mkwkhwawa.

Nandi is an intelligent woman, she has a Health and Hygiene qualification, has always worked and spends her life offering contraceptive advice to women



RIGHT:
Widge and Nandi

BELOW:
The rags the women in Malawi used to soak up their periods



and yet, despite all that, once a month Nandi used cloth rags to soak up her period. Rags which caused a rash, discomfort and distress; the same bits of material being used month on month, year on year.

“Despite our friendship,” explains Widge, “it was hard for Nandi to tell me this and deeply embarrassing for her to show me those cloths, but when she did, I just couldn’t stop thinking about it. You see, Nandi was not alone. She was one of hundreds of thousands of women in rural Africa using rags, newspaper or bits of old blankets because sanitary protection is so difficult to find and prohibitively expensive. She had been one of hundreds of thousands of girls missing a week of school every month, some even having underage sex to earn money to buy pads.”

At the time, Widge was working in the UK financial sector in a job she found “unsatisfying and too materialistic”. She recalls: “Someone once said to me, if you see something wrong in the world you can either do something or nothing. It resonated with me, so

in 2018, I decided it was time to do something.”

That ‘something’ was to set up her charity, Ufulu, which means ‘freedom’, with the aim of providing women and girls in Malawi with menstrual cups – sanitary protection that’s hygienic, reusable, safe and eco-friendly.

Her ‘lightbulb moment’ came when, after returning to Berkshire, she sent a cup to Nandi. “Back came a video,” recalls Widge. “Short and to the point but nonetheless it still, to this day, reduces me to tears. In it, Nandi simply said: ‘Thank you, Widge. God Bless. You have changed my life.’ A few pounds was all it took to give someone a new lease of life and rid them of their recurring shame.”

Of course, it’s not just about the cups. Women need advice, information and reassurance too and this is where Nandi comes in. The mother of three now works as Ufulu’s Workshop Manager and, together with Widge, runs sessions to show women how to use their cups and how to keep them clean.

“We keep the groups small to



ABOVE AND RIGHT:
Educating women is imperative

avoid embarrassment and to give the women chance to ask questions,” says Widge. “Schools are a big part of our work too because if girls are missing a quarter of their education just because they have their period, you’re never going to bring a developing country up in the world rankings. We do our best to get girls to discuss periods – it’s as taboo a subject in Malawi as it used to be in the UK.”

Talking of the UK, Ufulu and by that I mean Widge, is also making an impact here. Her passion for her cause is infectious and as well as fundraising she’s determined to educate people about period poverty and the environmental impact of their sanitary choices.

“Having a period isn’t an option but what protection you use is. One in five pieces of plastic on a UK beach is a tampon applicator. In the UK we flush 700,000 panty liners, 2.5 million tampons and 1.4 million pads every single day,” she says. “It’s as important to show women here that there are plastic-free options as it is to provide them to women in Malawi.”

One group of girls Widge has made a big impression on are pupils at The Abbey School in Reading. “Widge is an Old Girl and such a role model,” says Allison Hadwin, the Deputy Head. “She’s



enthused our pupils to take action, got them to talk openly about these issues and address them. When they found out that for just £10 they could take a girl out of period poverty for 10 years and give her the chance of a better life, they knew it was the charity they wanted to support.”

Improving the life chances of women in Malawi is something Widge can definitely credit herself with. She’s made an indelible mark on the people of Malawi and is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to her cause. So much so that she chose to fly back out to

Likoma before coronavirus hit to try to stop it reaching there. She’s now working tirelessly to provide every single one of the island’s 1,500 households with a bar of antibacterial soap – a luxury they can ill afford and is showing everyone how to properly wash their hands. At present Likoma is corona-free and Widge is determined to keep it that way because for her and so many others, the consequences of not doing so don’t bear thinking about. ♦
To find out more about Ufulu’s work and to donate, visit ufulu.org