Serving Zambia

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Serving Zambia addresses a real and pressing need. Today in Zambia, more than 690,000 children are orphans of the HIV/AIDS crisis and millions of Zambians live below the World Bank poverty threshold of $1/day. The dual pressures of disease and poverty have so weakened Zambia and its traditional extended family structure that many young people have little, or no, consistent adult supervision or care. Serving Zambia’s primary mission is to use tennis to help fill this gap.

Serving Zambia uses the power of sport to engage, empower, inspire, and “Help Young Zambia.” We provide tennis instruction, adult supervision, and fun to more than 600 boys and girls in Lusaka, Zambia. We supply tennis racquets, clothing, and shoes to any child who would like to play. Our programs operate after school and on weekends and provide a safe and fun environment. Our coaches partner with local schools to make sure that our children stay in school, on track, and away from the dangers of the street.

Our strategy to “Help Young Zambia” centers around keeping Zambian children and teens in school, on track, and away from the dangers of the street. We use tennis to help fill the gap in Zambian society caused by disease and poverty. Our coaches are the key to this strategy—Serving Zambia’s coaches are positive role models and establish on-going, caring relationships with the children. Most of our coaches grew up in the same neighborhoods where the children live. They know firsthand the hardships the children face and the consequences of a bad decision. They know how to keep the children motivated and out of trouble. Racquets, shoes, and clothing are not just handed out to anyone who shows up—dedication and commitment are prerequisites for receiving equipment. The results and achievements of all participants are celebrated, not just the results of the best players. School attendance and grades are monitored and the children must maintain both to stay in the program. In addition to helping participants succeed on the court and, more importantly, in school, we believe that our coaches can be a support system for children and their families, helping them through minor difficulties when the presence of another caring adult in their lives can have a big impact. In general, ages 12-14 for girls and ages 14-16 for boys are critical—during these years, many children stop going to school and succumb to the dangers of the street.

Serving Zambia is a grassroots organization. It was founded in 2005, inspired by the efforts of Teza Simunyola, a tennis coach in Westchester County, New York, to help children in his native Zambia. So far, nearly everything—the original inspiration, the coaching in Zambia, the “business” plan, “building” the organization, and organizing equipment drives and small fundraisers—has come from volunteers who are from or have a strong connection to Zambia and share a love of tennis and the belief that it can help change lives. Until recently, Serving Zambia literally operated out of a car trunk “borrowing” tennis courts across Lusaka for the program or creating “tennis courts” out of basketball courts, parking lots, or
any other flat surface. Everything has been donated: Teza Simunyola has funded out-of-pocket costs, our coaches currently volunteer their time, and other donors have provided equipment, paid for refurbishing and shipping racquets, travel to Zambia, and a van for the program. Several small fundraisers have raised money to offset operating costs in Zambia. The law firm of Latham and Watkins provided pro bono legal services that helped us incorporate and receive 501(c)(3) nonprofit status.

We continue to welcome donations of time, money, and equipment. To supplement our grassroots efforts and improve our programs, now that Serving Zambia is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization, we plan to expand our fundraising. The initial goal of fundraising is to raise money to be able to pay school fees and offer scholarships to help children stay in school.

We will apply for and hope to receive grants from foundations, endowments, and corporations. We know a key component of future fundraising success is our ability to demonstrate that Serving Zambia “works,” keeping children and teens in school and out of trouble. We are developing a methodology to track the performance of our participants that will include their school attendance, grades, and other factors. We would like to reach out to colleges and universities to donate their skills and experience.

We also will seek pro bono assistance with marketing to make our communications more effective.

To make Serving Zambia a youth driven, youth organized (and we hope, self-renewing) effort, we enlisted the support of junior and collegiate tennis players across the U.S. to donate and help collect “gently used” equipment to send to Lusaka, Zambia to support the program. We then sought the assistance of other tennis players and tennis-related organizations in the U.S. Sent close to 700 restrung and regripped racquets and dozens of containers of shoes, clothing, and other equipment to Zambia. Have additional equipment ready to ship.

Visited Zambia twice to gather information and increase our understanding of how we can most effectively “Help Young Zambia.” Met the coaches and children in Lusaka, helped run tennis clinics. Established a good working relationship with coaches, schools, and other volunteers in Zambia

Raised money to fund and support basic operations in Zambia including:

- $10,000 from several individual donors for purchase of a used van to transport coaches to program sites
• Prepared presentation for potential donors and to increase awareness of Serving Zambia. Delivered presentation at Metropolitan Interclub Tennis League Annual Meeting; at Bronxville School Family-School-Community Partnership Workshop; and to several potential individual donors.

• Enlisted the law firm of Latham and Watkins to help Serving Zambia (on a pro bono basis) incorporate as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and advise on other legal matters.

My recent personal efforts:

• Identified and recruited local high school students to raise awareness of Serving Zambia and to organize racquet, equipment, and clothing drives in their schools and communities and identified and recruited junior tennis players at private clubs and tennis facilities to collect equipment.

• Worked on Serving Zambia videos I will produce—a 90-second video for the website and a 3 to 5 minute video for other audiences using footage taken on trips to Zambia and by the coaches there. To add to what I learned in the Documentary Film for Social Change class at the Leadership Institute, I am working with my school’s Film Club and our advisor, a former producer for NBC Sports.

• Designed and set up website—compiled all information, wrote content, arranged methods to collect donations online (Currently waiting for everyone in the U.S. and Zambia to sign off on website content before it is launched—look for www.servingzambia.org coming soon)

• Identified various social innovation competitions to enter

• Created flyer on Serving Zambia

• Identified marketing/branding agencies that do pro bono work for nonprofits. Preparing information packet for them.

My siblings (Caroline and Peter) and I started Serving Zambia in the U.S. to support the efforts of our long-time tennis coach, Teza Simunyola and several of his fellow Zambian tennis players to “Help Young
Zambia.” Today, a number of people work with me on Serving Zambia. I am the youngest of the original group and other than the coaches in Zambia, I am currently the most active on a day-to-day basis. I perform a variety of tasks—basically, whatever needs to get done in the U.S.—but recently have focused on communications, outreach, and marketing. We have new people helping out all the time, and in the U.S. we will probably add new members to the original group, building out the organization as Serving Zambia grows. (By law, a separate organization is necessary in Zambia—it is now registered as Help Young Zambia.)

I once heard Andre Agassi say, “Life’s blessings are not handed out evenly.” Working on Serving Zambia has not only driven that fact home and made it real, it has also opened my eyes to just how extremely unevenly these blessings are distributed. Part of Serving Zambia’s mission is to use tennis to give Zambian children and teenagers “tools” to improve their lives. Working on the project has also helped me develop those tools. I have become more confident and I definitely feel even more than a responsibility to help others—I feel that given all “life’s blessings” that I have received, I have an obligation to help others. The kids are so eager, hard-working, and grateful for everything they have, it doesn’t feel like an obligation though—working with them feels more like a privilege.

By working on the project, I have also become more flexible, more resilient and a better problem solver. I have learned that nothing goes as planned so you need a lot of plans. After working on Serving Zambia for several years and learning more about current conditions in Lusaka and what is needed there to do the most for young Zambia, we realized that one of the goals of our initial plan—to build a permanent tennis facility/community center that the kids could walk to—could wait. More important is providing scholarships and assistance with school fees. For many children it is not a matter of helping them stay in school, but helping them be able to afford it in the first place. I have learned the importance of stepping back from what I am doing every once on a while to reassess a situation and change course if necessary.

I am learning how to work effectively with a lot of very different people—people of different ages, personalities, and cultures. I have also been surprised by how willing people are to help projects like Serving Zambia. It seems like the key is to be organized, communicate what help you need, and follow up.

Working on Serving Zambia, getting to know the kids in the program (even if it is through video for now), and working with the coaches has made me a “better” person—I don’t know how else to say it.

Locally, I hope Serving Zambia has encouraged people to be creative and find ways to use their own passions and skills to help others. It seems that a lot of times people would like to help but just don’t know how. I think Serving Zambia has definitely made people in my community really consider whether there could be a second life for some of the things they no longer want or use. One of my friends was looking at pictures on the Serving Zambia Facebook page and called me up to say he had seen a picture
of a boy, thousands of miles away, wearing a shirt that he (my friend) had donated. My friend felt instantly connected to the boy in the picture and to Serving Zambia as soon he saw that something as insignificant to him as an outgrown shirt could help someone else.

Many people in my community have been very generous and one person’s generosity has led to another’s. The high school tennis coach at my school knew about the project and told his wife, a reporter for the local newspaper, about it. She got someone at the newspaper to do a story on Serving Zambia. The story did not include an address, just our names. Within days after the story ran, racquets, bags of clothing, and shoes were left anonymously at our door. Almost a year later, a producer for Teen Kids News called our house. She remembered the newspaper story, tracked us down, and wanted to do a segment on Serving Zambia. A few months later a crew came to film and borrowed footage we had of the program in Zambia. Almost a year elapsed and we heard nothing. A few weeks ago, a producer emailed my brother to say the show would air across the country on April 9th. The next day, my sister got a call from a former classmate who lives in Texas. He wanted to help. Being involved with Serving Zambia has definitely proven to me that people and communities across the world are all connected and there are many ways to help each other.

The kids in Zambia motivate me not just to work on my action plan but also to take advantage of and really appreciate all the resources and support that I have in my life. I had hoped to go to Zambia over winter break last December but was not able to. But from photographs and working with the video footage my sister took on an earlier trip, I feel like I know these kids. I have worked with the footage over and over and see how happy these kids are to be playing tennis and how hard they work to improve. I listen to them explain how much they want to help each other and help their country, and I see picture after picture of them standing together with their arms protectively around each other. Then I watch images of where they live and see poverty that is beyond description. I learn that half of the kids are orphans and another quarter of them have only one parent. Something a man in Zambia told my sister sticks in my mind—“Lots of people come here making promises,” he said to her. “Then they never come back.” I think of his words and then I think of the kids and that’s all the motivation I need. I just wish I had more time (and more resources) to make things happen faster and to help more.

I did attend the Leadership Symposium. More than anything it inspired me to keep working hard on Serving Zambia and to not get discouraged when progress seems slow. Talking to everyone at the Symposium and hearing about their projects made me realize that the frustrations I was experiencing were common and having setbacks with a project is not unusual. Now I am more patient and less flustered by logistical problems. I have a better sense of the big picture. There is much more that Serving Zambia needs to and can do—I feel like we have just gotten started—but I am happy that we have, even in a little way, made a difference for some great kids in Zambia.

I also found the Symposium workshops helpful because they addressed topics that were very relevant to the stage of my action plan. “Supporting Your Action Plan with Effective Communications,” “Time
“Management,” and “Transitioning Your Project” were especially helpful. I hadn’t really thought about the idea of stages/transitions in my project before, but I now realize that Serving Zambia has moved through several stages from an idea to an action plan to action and then back—regrouping based on circumstances and what works and doesn’t, revising goals and action plans accordingly, and then moving forward again. One step forward, half a step backward is still half a step forward.