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Watercolour paintings line the walls. There's an African village with mud huts and thatched roofs, African birds, and animals. They hang like ripe fruit waiting to be plucked for their underlying story.

Toronto resident Mary Long is more than happy to animate that story and share her adventures in Africa. In fact, she has already started writing a book about her experiences as a missionary in Malawi from 1952 to 1962, and again from 1991 to 1997.

Now 88, she is quick to dismiss her astonishing aptitude at transcribing dozens of hand-written notes.

"I did it on that..." she says, indicating the computer in her room at Fieldstone Commons Care Community in Scarborough, Ontario, where she has lived for the past ten years.

## A Changed Life

Born in Leicester, England in 1928, Mary received a firm calling on her faith at the age of 21.

"I went to Malawi because the Lord led me there," she said, reflecting on the moment she knew her life had changed forever. "It was His decision."

Speaking slowly and carefully at a measured pace, with a pronounced speech impediment due to a stroke 10 years ago, Long takes the time to find precise words. She delivers them with the composed nature of someone who has lived a lifetime according to a path she saw for herself at a young age.

"I was at a youth conference, and the speaker was preaching about becoming a real Christian. It was something he said. A light bulb went off in my head, and I knew immediately that my life would change." She quickly corrected herself. "Had changed."

It was June 5, 1949, and the following day she went to a meeting for people who had made a strong decision in their faith. Alone in a train compartment, she had a meeting with God.

“I heard Him say to me, ‘I have something special for you to do. But it's not connected to what you are doing right now.’”

At that time she was working for Kodak and considered herself a churchgoer, but not necessarily a practicing Christian. The voice she heard was as if someone was sitting next to her, yet it did not mention where or when she should go.

“I wrote to a friend who was the treasurer of a mission, and I sought his advice. He invited me to their AGM, where there was a man who had just returned from Malawi and spoke of a missionary who was leaving. He announced to the room: ‘Maybe there is someone here today who is called to replace her.’ And it was as though the Lord was speaking directly to me. At the end of the service, I came forward to say that this person was me.”



## Preparing for Malawi

Malawi, formerly known as Nyasaland, was under British rule from 1891 to 1964, becoming the Republic of Malawi after gaining independence. It is a landlocked nation, sharing its borders with the countries of Zambia, Tanzania, and Mozambique.

With a rural population largely dependent on agriculture and international aid, Malawi remains one of the world's least developed countries. In 2006, its profile was raised with the widely-reported news that Madonna had adopted a Malawian boy.

Although she had received the destination where her calling should be carried out, the road to Africa was not exactly a straight one. She would need to spend the next two years preparing to become a missionary.

The mission was able to pay her passage to Africa, but it was a group of friends from the church that collectively stepped forward and offered to help with the cost of Bible college.

“My friends were in their teens or early twenties and in their first jobs. They promised to support me in Bible school for the next two years. Once I had finished, I travelled to Africa by boat.”

## Teaching

It took a month to get there, travelling alone and circling the African continent via ports in Angola and South Africa, to Beira in Mozambique on the southeast coast, where she disembarked.

“There were a few other missionaries on that boat, from different missions, as well as tea and coffee planters, and a policeman heading out to boost up the police service.”

Long went inland by train through Mozambique, over the Zambezi River, and across the border into Malawi, en route to the central city of Blantyre.

“I arrived in Cholo, a district south of Blantyre, surrounded by tea plantations. The head of the mission was an older man in his sixties, and I lived in his house as a boarder for the next two years before moving into my own house.”

The mission church was made of homemade bricks and contained a school with six classrooms, a carpenter’s workshop, a print shop, and an office. It was situated on the edge of the Great Rift Valley that stretches from the Red Sea through eastern Africa to Mozambique.

“From the school, I could see about 3,000 feet to the valley below.”

English was the official language of the government, and the local children came to the mission to learn the language, up until grade six. The headmaster’s wife was fluent in the Malawian language, Chichewa, and helped Long adapt to it as well as support her with the teaching.

“I learned Chichewa in my first year, becoming proficient to teach Bible studies in it from my second year. I could speak German and French and tried hard to use their language as much as I could. I am still fluent today.”

## A New Path

In sixteen years of living in eastern Africa, Long contracted malaria twice but says the health conditions were not her main challenge.

“There was a small dispensary at the mission for simple things. We didn't have a doctor, but there was a hospital in Cholo run by Seventh Day Adventists. The main challenges were language and culture. The locals mostly practiced tribal beliefs.”



She went to visit a friend at a mission eighty miles away. When she went back a second time the following year, a romance promptly blossomed with a Canadian missionary there.

“We were engaged a week later,” she proclaimed with a coy smile.

She returned to England by boat four years after leaving. Her fiancé, Charlie, arrived three months later to meet her parents and to get married. The newlyweds then set out for Charlie’s hometown of Toronto.

The eldest of their six children was born in Toronto a few months before they headed

back to Malawi to start a Bible school on the other side of the valley. Charlie was the principal of the school, and Mary, she quips, did everything else. They stayed for five more years, had two more children, and settled back in Ontario for the next three decades.

“During that time, I was a preacher’s wife and had another three children. Charlie worked until he became sick, and after a long period of illness, he died. I was forced to work and became a bank teller for 13 years, which enabled me to have a pension that is paying for my retirement. We were not a wealthy family by any means, but always happy.”

After her husband’s death, with three of her children married and the other three in college or working, Long decided to go back to Malawi on her own. This time she flew and was stationed at a mission about a hundred miles from Blantyre.

“The Bible school which Charlie and I started was joined by two other schools from different missions. I was teaching again, and because I had been working at a bank, they enlisted me as treasurer and bursar.”

## Passing on the Faith

Her faith has had a striking impact on her children and grandchildren. Two of her three sons and one of her ten grandchildren are pastors.

She points to a framed photo of her children together, which is perched on the dresser.

“They all have faith,” she says with a note of pride, and is very clear about what it means to have lived in faith herself for almost seven decades.

“Everything!” she declares without a moment of hesitation.

**About the Author:** *Drew Tapley is a writer for Sienna Senior Living.*