

Malawi and Solar Cookers International  
June 8-24, 2013  
Claudia Sansone

Malawi, the Warm Heart of Africa certainly warmed my heart and some favorite dishes!

I have had the privilege of attending the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women in 2012 and 2013. While there, I met Arline Lederman and Patricia McArdle who sit on the Board of Solar Cookers International. Through their experiences, I was impassioned by cooking with solar rays! Then, I read *Farista* written by McArdle and was convinced that it was a means of cooking in Malawi, Africa that I needed to pursue.

What Patricia McArdle wrote makes so much sense: “this simple technology will dramatically improve the lives of the hundreds of millions of women and children who must travel miles from their villages to gather wood every week. Using solar cookers in combination with fuel-efficient stoves and retained heat cookers will also dramatically reduce deforestation and CO2 emissions. Cooking and pasteurizing water with the sun can prevent millions of deaths each year from diseases caused by drinking contaminated water and by inhaling the smoke of cooking fires.”

I contacted Solar Cookers International and found that the corporate headquarters was only an hour away in Sacramento. I met with Julie Greene, the Executive Director and discussed the feasibility of making solar cookers in Malawi. She convinced me and I bought a couple of kits and lots and lots of cooking bags. I promptly set up shop at my home and began my experimentation. Lo and behold, those solar rays really worked!

I wanted to focus on dishes made with ingredients that I could get in Malawi, so I made rice, rice with carrots and peas, sweet potatoes, sweet potatoes and ground nuts, vegetable stew. I even successfully made banana nut bread and granola bars. I was having fun experimenting.

Next was to construct the solar cookers. I am not crafty by any stretch, but with the help of my son and husband, we pulled off the first one. I took the photo of the layout and measurements from the manual to Kinkos Copy Store and had them print a dozen templates out of sturdy paper that was plasticized.

I found sheets of cardboard at a shipping/packaging company and bought several 3'x4' cardboard sheets. On our great big outdoor table, I laid out the template on the cardboard and began cutting, making sure that all of the fold locations were clearly marked with a sharpie to identify where to fold and cut the slit which is vital.

So far so good! Next was slathering on heavy duty Elmer's glue and laying heavy-duty aluminum foil on the template which soon actualized into a solar cooker! Pressing down with a dough scraper from the kitchen can remove the creases in the foil beautifully. That is *multi-purposing* your kitchen equipment!

Then comes the folding. I used a metal 24" ruler. Pressing into the sharpie markings for creases, I folded and pressed. Ta da! The first fold. Following suit with the rest of the creases, cutting the slit to insert it together, I placed the top ends into the slits and clamped on simple clothes pins to hold it as secure as a clothes pin could.

Into a 3-quart black speckled enameled pan, place in whatever is on the menu, put on the lid, slide it into a clear oven bag, and secure it close with twisty or a thick rubber band (rubber bands were my choice).

Locate the solar cooker in direct line with the sunshine. Usually around 11:00am to 3:00pm works best. When removing the pan, beware. It is actually HOT! Et voila! A finished dish in approximately 3-4 hours! Still, it is always shocking how well it works. Don't forget to save those oven bags to use over and over again.

So, I took my dog and pony show on the road. First stop was outside of Lilongwe, Malawi at Elizabeth Chikoya's Women's Development Center with 25 students – 24 women and one darling young man, Anold.

My friend, Teri Williams, joined us on our trip as a potter. We divvied up the class, half making beads and the other half making solar cookers. Then, as a reward throughout our 8:30-4:30 day, the group sang their favorite native songs. We danced and we sang with joyful hearts.

In the evening, Teri and I would make monster batches of either pasta or lentil soup or I would make pizza and bread in their out door oven for lunch. These darling women ate like it was their last meal.

The next week, Teri and I took a double-decker bus on a four-hour trip to Zomba where we stayed with dear friends, Dick and Charlotte Day. Charlotte, a retired Early Childhood Development professor who I adore and admire profusely, heads a group called the GogoGrandmothers ([www.gogograndmothers.com](http://www.gogograndmothers.com) and [www.safe.africa.org](http://www.safe.africa.org)). She and Mary, her colleague, brought 18 women from 9 villages-

9 for Teri's bead-making and 9 for me to a school they had built and staffed. Each of the women's responsibility was to lead, teach and pass their new resources forward to their villagers.

We had the production of the solar cookers down to a science by now. We couldn't find the black enamel pots, so we went to the outdoor market where artisans make pots out of thin stainless steel. We ordered two dozen, bought a can of dull black paint for the outside of the pots and we were good to go.

Much to our dismay, the day we finished and had them laid out in the schoolyard, it was drizzling and very cloudy. We did sun dances to no avail. Not one ray of sun to show off their new way of life. But, the seed was planted!

Charlotte shared that "The joy for me was to see the JOY of the LORD in all involved!" At the conclusion, with prayer and tears, the facilitators received a solar cooker 'kit' and pot with wooden spoons for each village. They all learned how to do the 'cooking', so they will test their solar cook kits in their own villages.

Since the interest was so high, the 'Gogo Grandmothers' organization approached a large outside interest for aid for solar cooking. It can only grow from here.

The joy of watching women becoming empowered was worth the trip!

\*It was necessary to bring all supplies except cardboard to our classes. Cost and availability are prohibitive for villagers.

\*\*My husband, Dr. Rob Hampton, DDS, works out of

Daeyang Luke Hospital in Lilongwe while we are there.

7/30/13 sent photos and letter to SCI, Arline Lederman,  
Patricia Lederman, Radha Muthiah, Charlotte Day, Elizabeth  
Chikoya, Jeff Thendwa, Cat Cora, Mary Ellen McNish, Dr.  
Mary Shawa Nagere