

Acceptance Speech for the Rewey Belle Inglis Award, November 2004

Read by Leila Christenbury at the CEE Luncheon in Indianapolis for Patricia P. Kelly

I regret very much that I am unable to be at NCTE this year to accept the Rewey Belle Inglis award. I'm both honored and humbled by being selected. At the moment I am flying from Africa, where I have been working for the last five years with a USAID project in Malawi, a subSaharan African country, to strengthen primary teacher education. Malawi is one of the three poorest countries in Africa. Famine has occurred for the last three years because of drought. Most of the 12 million people are subsistence farmers living on about a dollar a day. A high rate of HIV/AIDS leaves the country with orphans and young people. Yet Malawi is a beautiful country, and its people, quick to smile, have earned it's being called "the warm heart of Africa."

Through better primary education, we hope to improve basic literacy and access to education especially for girls. The majority of girls drop out of school between grades 2 and 4 to work in the fields and home. They marry young, often at the family's direction. Girls who do stay in school must contend with not only doing their class work but also cleaning the school including latrines, and then carrying a heavy workload at home. Secondary schools are either residential schools or necessitate a long, unsafe walk from home to school. Secondary schools are, for the most part, tuition-based, which makes it even more problematic for many girls to attend. The colleges are overwhelmingly male by design with few hostels (dormitories) built for young women. Government offices, banks, and businesses are almost all run by men. Even in primary teaching, men predominate.

We know that educating girls impacts not only the education level of the families they will eventually have but also raises the economic level of those families. It is said that, if you educate a boy, you educate an individual, but if you educate a girl, you educate a family.

However, woman primary teachers also need advocates here. When we selected six teachers to come to the US for doctoral studies, not one woman was chosen initially by the interviewing committee. Only after some strong negotiation were two women included. The same was true when selections were submitted for an in-country master's programs. Finally six women were chosen out of 24 candidates. Just last week I again heard from a committee of male instructors, explaining why only six women out of 30 had been selected for the new bachelor's of education program, even though the goal was 50 percent. "We can't sacrifice quality," they said. How many times have all of us heard this same excuse in other contexts! I didn't know whether to laugh, or to cry, or to just get mad.

So it is for the young girls and women teachers in developing countries, and for my students whose accomplishments have made me so proud, and for my WILLA friends who through their teaching make a difference in children's lives that I accept the Rewey Belle Inglis award today. *Zikomo*, which means "thank you" in Chichewa.