

Location: Mshilozi Settlement, White River, South Africa
Staff Member: Maria Ziessler

“*Maria! Maria! Maria!*” The children in Mshilozi settlement chant Maria’s name as they race to the car. As we get out, the children quickly encircle us, shaking our hands and unloading the oranges, bread rolls and heavy bucket of steaming soup from the car. They are excited to see Maria but also to find out what she has planned for the afternoon.



Maria hangs out with these thirty or so kids every Friday afternoon. She knows each child by name, their talents, their interests, and their needs. After the kids eat and play for a few minutes, possibly reading books from their library or playing dress up, Maria normally teaches them a story from the Bible, complete with props and reenactments. Today, however, she has a special surprise for them.



While the kids gobble down their hot soup and bread, I go to the back room to set up the projector. Slowly the kids begin to trickle in, sitting on the floor and facing the white sheet hanging on the wall by the door. Since it is a holiday, Maria has chosen to show a special movie today: *Queen of Katwe*. It is a true story about a ten-year-old girl who grows up in the slums of Uganda but then overcomes the odds to become one of the nation’s top chess players.

As the movie plays, every child in the room identifies with the characters and situations in the movie. They love it, laughing often and probably understanding the Ugandan children in the film better than most. Through the movie, but more significantly, through Maria’s weekly Friday afternoon visits, these thirty or so children again and again experience hope, laughter, and love.



Much of Mercy Air’s focus is on providing aid and transportation throughout southern Africa. However, many Mercy Air staff members also take time to serve in the local community through their own ministries. Maria’s is just of the ministries that take place right here in White River.