What GAIA Means to Me
Ashley Paff

I originally got involved with GAIA back in 2007 when Amy Rankin-Williams asked me to join GAIA's Development Committee. Shortly thereafter, I joined the Finance Committee, and since 2018 I have been serving on GAIA's board of trustees, where I've had the pleasure of chairing the Finance Committee. Which means that for almost two decades, my job has mostly been to ask "where is the money going?" — and the answer, every single time, has made me prouder to be part of this organization.

I want to take you back to the beginning, because I think it explains so much about GAIA. When Bill Rankin and Charlie Wilson founded the organization in 2000, AIDS in Africa seemed like an unsolvable problem. We were in the early days of antiretrovirals, and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, it felt like the epidemic was simply going to keep winning.

But Bill used to tell a story about the moment that changed everything for him. Charlie told him that if a pregnant mother, as she was going into labor, received a single dose of an antiretroviral, and her newborn also received a dose within 24 hours of birth, then the chances of that mother passing HIV on to her child were cut in half. The cost of that entire course of treatment? Four dollars. When Bill heard that, the impossible problem suddenly looked very possible. That is the spirit GAIA was built on — and it's the same spirit that took the two of them to Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the world, to start doing something about it.

That founding conviction — that four-dollar-dose kind of stubborn optimism — still runs through everything the organization does today. Todd Schafer has carried the torch as our Executive Director for many years now, and on the ground in Malawi, none of this happens without the extraordinary dedication of Joyce Jere, the Executive Director of GAIA Malawi. Joyce is the one who actually turns the four dollars into a life saved, week after week, and we are so lucky to have her.

The work itself has evolved a great deal since those founding days, and today GAIA is mostly focused on two areas: developing the local healthcare workforce and operating mobile health clinics. Through the GAIA nursing scholars program, over 750 nurses have graduated from local nursing colleges and are now deployed to the far corners of Malawi. Every single one of those nurses will go on to treat thousands and thousands of patients over the course of a career. Pretty remarkable.

Personally, however, I feel most connected to the mobile health clinic program. Each mobile health clinic is a Toyota Land Cruiser stocked with medications and staffed with a clinical officer, a nurse, a few assistants, and a driver. Each clinic has a weekly route and spends a full day in each of five remote villages providing basic healthcare to residents there. A few years ago, I traveled to Malawi and saw the clinics in action. At every stop, hundreds of people were already lined up waiting — people who

would otherwise have to walk miles to reach a government clinic, or who simply wouldn't get care at all. Today, GAIA's seven mobile clinics reach 35 remote communities every week across rural southern Malawi, providing over 250,000 patient visits a year, treating everything from HIV to TB to malaria. And thanks to an incredibly successful – and ongoing – major gifts campaign, I'm thrilled to tell you that two brand-new clinics will begin operating in the Nsanje district in the southernmost part of Malawi next week. We hope, with the generosity of people like you, that more new clinics will follow.

When our wonderful board chair, Jim Cashel, meets with GAIA donors, he has been asking them a simple question: *why GAIA?* Malawi is a country most people have never heard of, halfway around the world, competing for your generosity against a hundred worthy causes closer to home. The answers he has gotten back have been anything but simple — grief, gratitude, outrage, joy, memory, even a final paycheck a frustrated USAID employee couldn't bring himself to keep. But underneath all of it, he has found two things in common: first, **imagination** — the ability to picture a life you will never see, in a place you may never go, genuinely changed — and **empathy**, the quiet satisfaction of knowing you were part of that change.

My work with GAIA over the past 20 years has brought me tremendous joy and fulfillment.