It was so great to have my parents here, though it was by far the worst / craziest / busiest month that we have experienced since living here so I fear they may have felt a bit neglected at times.  No doubt, however, that they have no shortage of stories to share: from bats in the home to no electricity to water shortages to experiences in villages or hospitals to the car getting stuck in the ditch to the "amazing" Tanzanian roads to rain every day to attempts to complete construction projects, etc...  Things definitely were not dull.

To be honest, I'm not even sure where to start in order to provide an update... December is somewhat a blur.  My parents arrived on Friday, December 4 in the wee hours of the morning and had only a few short hours to sleep at the hotel before beginning the trek back to Geita.  We arrived that evening and they had a good first evening with their grandchildren, despite a bat or two flying around the home, though I'm not sure how much of that first day they remember (conversations with them were not very coherent at the time due to their lack of sleep).  On Saturday, Asher came down with a violent stomach bug that he picked up from the family that he stayed with while Scott and I were getting my parents.  Thankfully, this virus was not passed to anybody else because he remained ill for the next 5 days.  My mother and I spent the first week preparing for the Neema House Christmas Party and organizing things for Neema House while my dad began work on a fort / slide for the kids at Neema House.  Unfortunately, it rained every day and so progress was slow and the roads quickly began to deteriorate.  We made trips to the market and Gold Mine and various places around town so that they could get a glimpse of our normal everyday lives and had worship at our teammates' house.  My parents made a trip or two to the local hospital with me to follow up on children there who needed possible placement.  They were able to witness several cases of severe malnutrition as well as the conditions of the government hospital.  I'll let them better describe to you those conditions.  We also had one of these children placed at Neema House that week again from the hospital.

Then Friday, 11 December hit and everything began to unravel.  My mother and I headed to Mwanza to take a severely malnourished child to a clinic that specializes in malnourished children (and has an American doctor) for a follow up appointment.  This child had been with us for 5 weeks and came to us at 7.5 lbs and 11.5 months old.  He was vomiting when he was first placed with us, but the hospital had prescribed medication and told us to give him worm medication.  He did not improve.  Over the 5 weeks that he was with us, we took him to the private hospital in Geita, the clinic in Mwanza (three times), and eventually had him hospitalized at the regional hospital in Mwanza.  He had spent 8 days at the end of November at my home, sleeping on my chest every night and me feeding him small amounts every hour or two.  He had started to slowly gain a little weight (about half a pound).  Though we never got the vomiting under control completely, he seemed to be vomiting less.  We had discovered that he seemed to have a milk allergy, so we had begun making a coconut milk formula and then later gave him another formula that my parents had brought.  After he began gaining weight, he had returned to Neema House and they were documenting everything.  I had considered bringing him back to our house after returning from Rwanda, but when Asher came down with the stomach virus I knew that was not an option.  He was on 4 different antibiotics in those 5 weeks because his body was too frail to fight anything, but he went from crying non-stop to smiling and interacting and sitting up.  However, when we went for the follow up appointment on the 11th, they told us that he had lost weight since he had been there two weeks earlier and recommended hospitalization in the regional hospital there.  Though we had hoped to avoid it (due to the conditions of the hospital) we were out of other options.  He had started running a fever on Thursday evening and began having raspy breathing that morning.  They told us that he had come down with pneumonia (again) and started him on oxygen before transferring him to the hospital.  Of course, in the midst of this, we had a Neema House Board of Director arriving at the airport in Mwanza along with her husband that we were supposed to be picking up, so I had to leave my mother at the hospital to help handle the admission while I collected them (since my mom driving or finding her way anywhere was not an option).  My poor mom.  The doctor at the clinic spoke English but apparently not the nurse that they sent with her for the admission process...or anybody else working at the hospital that she encountered.  She may have maxed out her stress capacity those couple of hours.  I collected Julie and David and returned to the hospital to check on my mom. In the meantime, Scott was frantically trying to find staff to go to Mwanza to stay in the hospital with Musa while he was admitted and figure out how to get them to me.  Julie (BOD member) stayed at the hospital while I took my mom and her husband back to the ferry (about a 45 minute drive) where our teammate met them and I picked up one of our employees.  I then drove back to the hospital to complete the process and hand off instructions to our staff member.  They still had not done anything at the hospital (they had been instructed to insert a feeding tube immediately and administer an IV).  I then had to get Julie back to Geita because she was already scheduled to be in town only 4.5 days, so I opted for the ferry with the worse road because the wait would be shorter and we were running out of time to make it back before dark (it's not very safe to drive after dark).  Unfortunately, I had no concept of how bad the road had gotten in the previous few weeks of rain.  It was easily the worst road I have ever driven on and there were plenty of times where huge chunks were missing and it was virtually impassable.  In the end, we made it but we were still on the dirt road after dark (yikes!) and driving long after dark on the paved road.  Then about 15 minutes before we arrived home, I received a phone call from our employee in hysterics saying that Musa had died and had never received any treatment in his time at the hospital.  I called our manager (Lucas) who met me at Neema House as soon as I pulled into town and we contacted the family and made arrangements to head back to the hospital the following morning to collect the body.  We also contacted staff to cancel the Christmas party the following day.

Saturday morning Lucas and I left around 6:30 am to head back to Mwanza were we purchased a tiny coffin (so incredibly depressing) and met Mama Rose (our staff member) to begin the seemingly never-ending discharge process at the hospital.  I had to witness the body in the morgue and then provide the coffin for him to be loaded into and then placed in my car.  It was a somber trip back to town (and a long wait for the ferry) where we collected more staff members who went with us to the grandmother's home.  Upon arrival, there were over 100 people already gathered for the funeral and burial.  The men prepared the body, some people sang, a pastor spoke, and then Lucas and I were both expected to speak.  This was less than desirable since: 1) I was a complete emotional wreck and doing my best to remain as composed as possible; and 2) knowing what to say in English would have been difficult enough, let alone knowing what to say in Swahili.  In the end, we could not stay for the meal afterward due to it already being dark, so we promised the family that we would return the next day.  Scott remained at home helping to entertain my parents, Julie, and David and making sure they were fed and cared for.

Sunday morning, Lucas and I returned to the grandmother's home to spend time with the family and offer our condolences again.  Julie and David went to a village church with our teammates, and my parents remained home with Scott and the boys.

I knew that we would have children die because every home I have talk to has gone through this experience and because sometimes children are placed when they are so ill and our options for healthcare are so limited.  Still, it is an anguish that you cannot prepare for, especially when you have personally spent so much time caring for that child.  I will not pretend that this has been easy to process and I had a lot of sleepless nights afterward and a lot of dreams about people blaming me for his death.  I know that these are normal stages of grief, but that does not make them any easier to deal with.  However, there was no time to sit and grieve (maybe that was a good thing; maybe it was not) but we had things happening, and guests visiting, and work to do.  So on Monday I headed to a village with Julie to visit a child who had gone home in March and that night we hosted an adult singing / worship time at our home.  On Tuesday I headed to another village with Julie and my parents to visit a child who had gone home in October.  And on Wednesday my mother and I took Julie and David back to Mwanza to catch a flight the following morning.

Thursday, December 17, we received a call at 8:00am asking us to go to the Social Welfare Office.  There, we were asked to check on a baby whose mother had died during childbirth the previous day and to do an emergency placement, if needed.  We went and spoke with the father and neighbors and learned there was also a 1.5 year old child and no nearby relatives to help care for them or any long-term ability to provide milk for the baby.  We agreed to placement of the children until further arrangements for their care can be made.  My parents and I left the following day for a safari in the Serengeti.

We returned to town on Monday, December 21, and 15 minutes later I received a text stating that Suzanna (who was then 4 days old) had vomited two times that morning.  I went next door to check on her and though she was not running a fever it was clear that something was wrong because her body was rigid.  We rushed her to the local private hospital where she received the best medical care that I have witnessed here.  Within less than 20 minutes of arriving, she had been admitted to a private room (I did not know those existed!) given IV medications for a bacterial infection, placed on oxygen and under a heater.  I returned the next morning to check on her and she appeared to be doing well and responding to the antibiotics.  They predicted that she would be there for close to a week but stated that she was doing well.  I left and returned home only to receive a text about 10 minutes later that she had died.  Ultimately, Suzanna had contracted a bacterial infection at birth, believed to be Strep B.  Though pregnant mothers in America are tested for this and administered antibiotics during delivery if they are positive, those types of tests are not done here.  Even if she had been given antibiotics PRIOR to showing symptoms, there is still a 60% chance that she would have died.  The fact that we could not get treatment until symptoms were shown because no tests are done here meant that her chances of survival were very grim from the beginning.  Though she was responding to the antibiotics, her heart was not strong enough to hold on.  And the fact that we had lost two babies in a week and a half was devastating, though it was easier to process Suzanna because I knew that everything that could have been done for her was done; she had not passed away in a hospital where she had been for hours with no care.  Thankfully, my father went with me to the hospital to collect her body and do the discharge.  Holding her body for 20-30 minutes through the discharge process and then handing her off to her father who had just lost his wife the previous week was agonizing.  We took him to his home and then helped with the burial process.  Lucas and I then had to follow up with the social welfare officer who was attacking us for the fact that we had taken the child to a private hospital instead of to the District Hospital.  And then, of course, the Neema House Christmas Party had been rescheduled for this day and food had already been started before the other staff learned what had happened, so we then had to return to a party that we had no desire to participate in.  In the end, I think it was a good afternoon for everybody to take our minds off of the heaviness of the rest of the month, but it was still difficult.

On the 23rd, with the help of my mother, I finally was able to get Christmas presents wrapped and around my tree (this is something I usually do the weekend after Thanksgiving) and it started to feel somewhat Christmas-y.  We had guests from town come visit the children at Neema House on the 24th and bring a cake and snacks to honor them and we had a small Christmas party at our teammates' house.  My mother and I spent the day sorting through the shoebox Christmas gifts that my sister's church had sent to make sure that all tags were removed, toys were labeled, and clothes were appropriately sized.  What a big job!

On Christmas Day, my parents, Scott, the boys, and I had a nice Christmas morning that started (of course) very early and then mid-morning we took the presents to the kids at Neema House and watched as they all opened them.  We ended the day with a late meal and games together with Lucas at our home and then attempts to Skype with family in America, though internet was not really cooperating.  The 26th was our team Christmas meal at our home along with games and a lot of talking all day.  We spent the 27th attempting to rest a bit, "celebrating" dad's birthday, and packing / doing laundry in preparations of leaving the following day to return to Rwanda.

My parents boarded a plane in the wee hours of the morning on the 29th of December and we spent a day trying to catch our breath in Kigali before heading back to town on December 30.  Of course, new children were placed at Neema House on both the 29th and 30th so as we rolled into town I hopped out at Neema House to help finish the placement process while Scott took the kids home to unpack.

I had thought that New Years Eve was a holiday, but apparently it is not, so Lucas and I found ourselves busy all day on the 31st trying to catch up so many things that had been neglected in the previous few weeks (which is something that we are still trying to do).  Meanwhile, we had more guests arrive in town for New Years Eve because Geita typically hosts a New Years Eve party and so we had another family staying with us.  I eventually made it to the home, but I think my whole family had bowed out by 9:30 because we were so tired.  We spent New Years Day at the Gold Mine with the Mwanza families and then they left on Saturday the 2nd and we had, for the first time in a month, a chance to stop and catch our breath.  This last weekend was a hard weekend because it was my first chance to sit down and think about what had happened in December since I had been in survival mode constantly.  I had hoped to do absolutely nothing, but of course on the 3rd there was another child vomiting so she ended up at our house for several hours so I could monitor her more closely to ensure that it was not anything severe.

This week we are in clean up / catch up mode.  Our office has been taken over by all  the clothes / sheets / blankets, etc... that Julie and my parents brought or that were sent by my sister or other friends.  Hopefully I'll be able to start sorting them tomorrow.  Scott will be taking the boys tomorrow for medical physicals as well as to follow up in the driver's license process for two of our staff members so that they can drive the Neema House vehicle when we get it, and to get repairs done on our car because the brakes have begun squealing badly.  We have 3-4 days of team meetings scheduled over the next two weeks to better define expectations and plans as a team, as well as a Neema House staff meeting, scheduled visits, and a whole lot of unscheduled things that will happen.  The boys will start back to school.  Scott and Asher will both have birthdays.  And as for me, I want to lock myself in my room and sleep for about 3 days to try to reenter the land of the living because I am currently so exhausted.

And so that is my life for the past month, and I am tired.  However, there is no pause button on our job and responsibilities, and we still have a lot of work to get to where we can be gone for 3 months later this year (yes, this idea still gives me a panic attack).  But we will get there.  We made our outdoor worker (Steven) the Neema House Facilities Manager this week and I think between him and Lucas they will help keep things in order because they are both extremely hard workers.  And if the Neema House vehicle ever gets here (we are hoping to have it by March or April?), then we can send the two of them to do more things without us.  Please pray that this will give us a much needed opportunity to breathe.

We are also working on defining what our community outreach will look like.  There is a home like ours in Mwanza that has a community outreach program that has shown a lot of success over the years.  I have been talking to their director and she has asked if we would partner with them so that they can expand their program into the Geita region.  They will train us in their outreach program so that we do not start from scratch, and we will be able to offer it to the Geita region and the families in our community.  It will involve parent-education, assistance with business start-ups, and formula support to hopefully prevent the need for out-of home care for children.  We will continue corresponding about this (their director has moved back to England) and if all goes well then we will announce it at a meeting with the hospital and their partners at the end of this month / beginning of next month.  Please pray that we are able to figure out the details of this and work out the kinks so that we can better serve the community of Geita.

We also will be working on hiring more staff, re-evaluating some staff contracts, and continuing the many many projects that I have for Neema House facilities (including extending a porch on the baby home, building an enclosed porch / additional room on the main home, laying a sidewalk down to the baby home, putting bamboo up on the fence between Neema House and the farm, etc...).  We learned yesterday that our file has also been transferred from the District Social Welfare Office to the Town Council Social Welfare Office.  We believe that this will be a good switch for us because the District Social Welfare Officer was often unprofessional, seeking bribes, and attempting to force us to do things that we did not want to do (which we would have to politely refuse to do...but it was ultimately a constant dance).  However, it also means that we have to learn the nuances of a new office, how to communicate with them, their expectations, etc... and it will ultimately slow the process for potential foster / adoptive families because the new social welfare officer will have to learn this process.  Please pray that this transition goes smoothly and we are able to get all of these projects done as needed.

There are continued registration / visa issues with people here in Tanzania.  I think that I may have mentioned before that there are concerns about a group in Dar Es Salaam that is under the Neema House registration but has no interest in doing anything with children.  They have been attempting to get us to change our constitution, which would ultimately put a red flag on our back.  We are wanting them to change registrations in the midst of all the Church of Christ missionaries writing new registrations / changing due to all those issues that have existed since the Mtwarra team was kicked out of the country a year ago.  Scott and I will travel to Arusha next month to talk to the directors of Neema House Arusha to discuss their opinion and then we may have to tell the other group that they cannot stay on our registration for the protection of all of us.  Please pray that all of these discussions go well and that we communicate effectively.

I'm sure there is much much more, but that is all I can think of now.  Maybe, pray that we actually get to take a vacation in April like we are hoping to do when the kids have their school break.  It would probably be good for our sanity.

As always, thanks for checking on us!  I look forward to hearing what my dad has to say about his trip! :)

Cheryl