



Scotty Dossett of Urbana, Illinois and Charles Kalemba, of Zomba, Malawi—sharing “mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation—one individual, one community at a time.”

## A Short History of the Urbana Sister Cities Program

The Urbana Sister Cities Program was established in February 2008. Urbana’s first Sister City partnership was with **Zomba, Malawi, Africa**. Urbana Councilman Dennis Roberts presented the partnership request to the City Council following his return from Malawi as a member of the Urbana First Presbyterian Church’s 2007 Shallow Wells Mission trip—a program the church established ten years earlier to provide safe drinking water in rural areas of southern Malawi. This first city-to-city partnership was created with the city of Zomba, Malawi, a city of 90,000+ citizens, the administrative center of Zomba District in southern Malawi, and home of Chancellor’s College, University of Malawi.

In March 2010 Urbana was one of seventeen cities across the United States chosen to participate in the Africa Urban Poverty Alleviation Program (AUPAP) sponsored by Sister Cities International. Urbana was awarded a \$115,000 grant to complete a project to improve water, health, and sanitation in the Zomba peri-urban areas. This grant, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, offered our city the opportunity to build a stronger Sister City partnership in Africa while making a very tangible contribution to the better health and welfare of our friends in Zomba, Malawi.

Based on the success of the AUPAP project, Urbana was encouraged to apply to participate in a second Sister Cities International grant program, the Sino-African Initiative (SAI), a tri-lateral project that brought together health officials and sanitation and water experts from the American and Chinese Sister Cities to improve sanitation and create a trash removal program in our African Sister City.

While attending an international Water Quality Summit in China in 2010, Urbana Mayor Laurel Prussing established connections with officials from the **Haizhu District of Guangzhou, China**, who expressed an interest of forming a “Friendship City” partnership with Urbana. A Friendship City agreement was initiated May 18, 2012 and Urbana prepared to make its first visit to China.

A delegation from Urbana traveled to China in July 17–31, 2013 to invite our Chinese Sister City to participate in the *Sino-African Initiative*. On that trip we received approval to work with professors at Sun Yat-sen University on the SAI grant project. A series of exchanges between the participating parties resulted in a project that built trash collection bins, purchased a garbage truck, and started an organic waste composting station in Zomba.

Urbana has received official delegations from Guangzhong City traveling in America. In September 2015 Chinese visitors toured the city and university campus and enjoyed a dinner reception. The next day they met with the Chinese Consul General in Chicago before leaving for other destinations.

Acknowledging these accomplishments and public engagement activities, Urbana's Sister Cities Program was declared "2012 Sister City of the Year" by the Illinois Sister Cities Association. The award was presented at the Illinois Municipal League annual meeting held in Chicago, October 18, 2012.

Urbana's third Sister City partnership was created when the City was invited to become a "Twinning City" with **Thionville, France**. Our first international exchange soon followed. In November 2014 a delegation from Urbana traveled to France to attend the celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the liberation of Thionville from Nazi occupation at the end of World War II. Our delegation attended patriotic assemblies, laid a wreath at their war memorial, signed an official "Twinning Cities" Charter document, and watched a reenactment of the battle for the bridge in Thionville crossing the Moselle River.

Urbana hosted a reciprocal visit by Thionville officials September 9–12, 2015. The French delegates toured the city, visited Urbana's schools, the University of Illinois campus, attended opening night at the Ellnora Guitar Festival, and were guests of honor at a reception at the University of Illinois President's House before driving to Chicago to spend time sight-seeing before returning to France.

We continue to encourage community participation and sponsor new outreach activities to further the exchange of ideas and friendship between our international partners.

Dennis Roberts

Urbana Sister Cities Committee Chairman