

From Buffalo Evening News Sunday September 21, 2008 By Paula Voell

Helping those who can't help themselves WNYers reach out to African people

Each click of the laptop mouse brings up a photograph and accompanying story - some lovely, some horrifying - for Sister Linda Glaeser, SSJ, and her niece, Michele Sprada of Kenmore.

Here's Nevil, an orphan who died of cholera when he was only 12. They had been supporting Nevil's education for two years and wanted to meet him when they visited Kenya. "Instead, the head of the orphanage came to our flat and told us he had died," said Sprada.

"We just looked at each other and said 'Here we are, paying for his education, but first he needs clean water,' she said, "So we got a dream to build a well."

And so, now, there are photos of wells in small villages that they've sponsored in honor of Nevil.

They go on with photo after photo showing eager young faces, some attending school, others hoping that they will be sponsored because they have no way to pay the fees. And they trip over each other in trying to tell the compelling stories.

"There's Paul, our first college graduate, Nairobi University," said Glaeser, proudly displaying one success story.

These two aren't alone in their mission to help the people of Africa. Several Western New Yorkers have responded wholeheartedly to the needs they've witnessed there in recent years. They've gone many steps beyond writing checks and sending money. These are people who have founded agencies and forged personal bonds, who visit and keep in touch with what's happening.

For their part, in 2005 Glaeser and Sprada formed Future in our Hands-USA, which focuses on drilling wells, providing funds for education and micro-loans, as well as transportation to clinics for AIDS patients.

"It's not about charity," said Glaeser, explaining their commitment. "It's about justice."

The number of groups doing this kind of humanitarian work has reached such a critical mass that they've formed a loose coalition, which they call the Africa Consortium. This summer they held their first gathering so that individuals could meet and discuss what they are doing. "Mostly, we wanted to get together to share ideas," said Glaeser.

Their involvement started when Sprada spent a "working vacation" with Future in Our Hands-Kenya eight years ago in the village of Kisumu, where she taught, planted trees and helped with an immunization survey.

"It's something I've always wanted to do and I just went there on sort of a whim," said Sprada, a second grade teacher at Lindbergh Elementary School. "But I felt an affinity for the country.

"I didn't think it was anything I'd continue, but when I told others what I'd seen, they wanted to help."

As friends started giving them money, Glaeser and Sprada realized they needed a nonprofit group to handle administration and contributions, which have totaled about \$100,000 over the years.



Sister Linda Glaeser, SSJ helps plant a tree in a small African village

Though they hold jobs (Glaeser is a physical therapist), both are clearly invested in doing what they can for villagers thousands of miles removed. "You can do so much with so little," said Sprada, who now views things through the eyes of the needs in Africa.

When she visited there this summer - and was changing planes in Norway - she was informed that she would have to pay for overweight baggage. "I just started crying," she said, "and telling them that they didn't understand that the money could be used for some-one's education or to help dig a well"

Even small donations help greatly, they say. For example, it costs \$8 for a trip from a remote village to an AIDS clinic. "That amount can mean the difference between life and death," said Glaeser.

Glaeser got hooked when she went to Kenya with her niece in 2003. "I had heard all the stories and seen the videos," she said, "still when I saw the poverty, I was blown away."

In her hospital work, for example, she saw three patients in a bed, with a fourth on the floor, awaiting his turn in the bed.

Soon, she was connecting with people on a personal level, such as 4-year-old Seraphine, who was severely burned when her dress caught fire in a cooking fire, an all-too-common occurrence, Glaeser said.

"My job was to get her to use her arm, so we played ball together," said Glaeser, who observed that the little girl had an untreated infection. She learned that no one could afford the antibiotics, which cost \$10.

"I reached in my bag and gave them the money," said Glaeser. Since then, Seraphine's mother has dedicated the little girl's life to her, Glaeser said. "And I had just done what any human being would do."

Rather than being bowed down by the tragedies they see, the duo seems energized by the spirit of the people they meet.

"I found very hard-working people, who have so little," said Glaeser, who praised their initiative and creativity. One group of villagers, for example, used micro-loan money to buy plastic chairs, which they now rent out for gatherings.

The duo seems amazed at what has been accomplished, including the digging of 14 wells which cost about \$3,000 each, and the sponsorship of 30 students in one year, though they downplay attention to themselves. "This isn't us," said Glaeser. "It's God's work."

What touches them, they say, is that often Western New York children who have little money themselves respond by hosting fundraising events to help the African children.

"When I listen to the political speeches and the millions, billions, spent on campaigns and the trillions spent on war - our little effort pales," said Glaeser. "We're just eight women from Buffalo."

"But when I remember the real faces of the women and children in villages where we have made a difference I can have a little sense of peace that we have made a difference."

Their Web site is futureinourhandsusa.org. Web sites for other organizations include: bothyourhands.org, buffaloforafrica.org, crossroadssprings.org, globalafricanvillage.org and mothersclubtanzania.com.

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