

Educating Uganda

Local Woman Dedicated to Building Schools

BY MELANIE MORRISSEY CLARK

There are few things Karen Van Dyke loves more than spending a couple of weeks in the Republic of Uganda, walking 10 hours a day to visit makeshift schools and sleeping in a shack with one bat-infested latrine. Her face lights up as she talks about the things she sees there; about her hopes for the children and their families.

Fifty-one percent of the population of this country lives slightly below the international poverty line of \$1.25 a day. The country is currently subject to a severe food crisis, making education a low priority for many families.

Van Dyke, mother of five children ages 6 to 16, wasn't always a champion for Ugandan children. She always knew, however, that she wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. Previously a business consultant, she searched for and found her mission in life: to build schools in Uganda.

Van Dyke founded Educate Uganda, now a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, just a couple of years ago after accompanying her sister on a church trip to this landlocked country in East Africa. Along the way, she learned there was one "nice" school in the area, but it cost \$1,000 to attend for a year. The other, more rural, schools, cost \$20 a year — an amount still far out of reach for many area families with several children. "The group I was with debated the wisdom of sponsoring one child to go to the nicer school, or sponsoring lots of children to go to one of the rural schools. I decided to sponsor two girls at the rural school for a year, and took a photo of them home with me to show my children."

Van Dyke says she was very taken with the people of Uganda, particularly the children, who would sing and smile whenever the Americans came around. "They were so beautiful they took my breath away, but I kept wondering why there were so many children, and so few adults. Then I learned that many of them had lost one parent, or both, to AIDS or malaria or some other malady. Many were being raised by grandparents or other relatives." The average life expectancy in the area: age 47.

She also learned that children in Uganda experienced a 40 percent reduction in the risk of contracting AIDS if they attended school through grade six.

When she got home, her then-13-year-old son couldn't believe it only cost \$20 to send a child to school for a year. "Lots of people could do that," he



Karen Van Dyke has made it her mission to improve education in Uganda.

told his mom, and an idea began to form in Van Dyke's mind.

She started sharing her story with friends, who started giving her money to sponsor children to go to school. "Before we knew it, we had 300 kids sponsored by people and businesses from Omaha," she says. "One of my favorite memories is a little boy who rang my doorbell and handed me a bag of coins, saying 'I think I finally have enough money saved up.'" He had learned about the drive through Van Dyke's church, Saint Wenceslaus.

Her sister's Milwaukee, Wis., church raised enough money to build two classroom structures for a makeshift school made up of open-air room dividers, a mud floor and no roof. "I talked to my husband, Greg, and we decided to try and raise the rest so they could finish it. I called and talked to the woman who ran that school and asked if we could do that and she said, 'I will begin to pray.' We very

quickly raised that money and they built two more classrooms, latrines and a guttering system."

At the dedication in 2008, a 10-year-old boy turned to Van Dyke and said, "I have never in my life seen anything so beautiful."

Educate Uganda built another school — complete with seven classrooms and latrines — in 2009. "During the rainy season, with no roof and a mud floor, you couldn't even tell what color the children's uniforms were, they were so dirty." As proud as she was to build her first school, Van Dyke says she still "felt like I'd thrown one bucket of water into the ocean. There is just so much need."

This month, teachers' quarters will be completed at the site of that school, to attract good teachers to live and work there.

Now, Van Dyke and her team of volunteers is working to raise \$42,000 to build another school with four classrooms and latrines, and she was

thrilled to recently learn her organization was to be the recipient of Countryside Community Church's Easter offering in April, which should give her a healthy start. No one affiliated with Educate Uganda is paid, including Van Dyke. Every dollar goes to Uganda.

There are 26 schools in a 15-mile radius of the main village in the part of Uganda where Van Dyke is focused, each serving between 200 and 500 students, all of whom are very poor. Today, 1,500 children are being sponsored to attend schools, and there is no doubt that these sponsors are changing lives.

For now, the group sponsors only up to grade six, and, sadly, many children do not go on to secondary school. They get married or quit to work and help support their families. However, there are some signs that the tide is turning, at least a little.

"A couple of years ago when I was there, I saw a girl walking away from school. She told me she could pay everything but the book fee, which was \$5, so she couldn't go to school. We paid her fee and she was very grateful. Recently when I went back, I approached a girl I thought was her and asked how she was doing. It was her sister, who told me the girl had gone on to secondary school. To me, stories like this are evidence that parents are becoming empowered to see the benefits of keeping their children in school." Indeed, the benefits are many. In addition to academics, schools teach children that AIDS kills, to stay away from dark corners, to never take gifts for sex. "Telling girls they can say no is really important," Van Dyke says.

Educate Uganda is also empowering women. The group recently sponsored a program where professional crafters taught 12 area women the art of weaving high-quality baskets and making beaded necklaces. "Now they can help pay their kids' school fees and buy other essentials," Van Dyke says.

As for her own family, her husband is a working partner in the organization and fully supportive of her efforts. And the kids? "It's a real family project, and I think it has made us closer as a family," she says. Her eldest son will accompany her to Uganda next year. "This is not a vacation or a place to take children," she says. "We work hard and encounter some unpleasant things along the way."

Ultimately, it's the people who keep Van Dyke coming back. "If I had a nickel for every time someone in Uganda asked me what they could do for me, I could build a lot of schools," she says. **W**

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