

MAKING A DIFFERENCE A WORLD AWAY

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Chrisdee Imthurn, left, and Linda Hagen Miller smile at Imthurn's dining room table in her Hauser home May 24 while surrounded by items they brought back from Africa.

By DEVIN WEEKS Staff Writer

Driving up a washed-out road to a school in rural Kenya, Chrisdee Imthurn witnessed something she wasn't expecting to see.

"All the kids, from kindergarten to eighth grade, had picks and shovels and they were out repairing the road," she said, sitting on the back deck of her Hauser home with friend Linda Hagen Miller. "We drove through and they were singing as they were shoveling and repairing the road, filling in the holes."

The children followed Imthurn and her crew to the school and formed a half circle around them.

"They started singing 'If You're Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands,'" she said. "They had their shovels and their picks and they were singing, after working on the road all day. Can you imagine that happening in America?"

Impoverished, malnourished and living off the land with very little else to call their own, these children showed Imthurn the power of mind over matter.

"You go there and you see that they are truly living in mud huts and you realize how blessed we are here in America," she said. "We are so blessed, yet they're so happy, and they're so thankful for everything. They're so welcoming and thankful. They were praising God for everything they had, which was moving, and they were very respectful. They treated us so graciously."

Although these kiddos exhibited joy in their hearts, they still need food, clean water and education to sustain them and their families as they grow into adults.

This is where Partnering for Progress (P4P) comes in.

P4P is an Inland Northwest-based nonprofit that helps rural Kenyans with health care, education, sanitation and economic development.

Imthurn and Miller went on a 10-day trip to the Kopanga region of Migori, Kenya last September to conduct humanitarian work with P4P. They are both board members and work on the organization's communication committee.

"It really hits you," Imthurn said. "I'm a strong Christian, and it says in the Bible 'To those whom much is given, much is expected.' You see this and that's been part of where I've come from. I've always tried to help and do things to help others."

Miller has been with P4P for five years. The ladies met through another nonprofit about three years ago when Miller invited Imthurn to join her in volunteering with P4P. This worked great for Imthurn, who was nervous to travel abroad without someone she knew.

She shared a Christopher Columbus quote: "You can never cross the ocean unless you have the courage to lose site of the shore."

"I thought, 'Gosh, that's the truth. And I'm going to do this,'" Imthurn said. "Otherwise you're always going to want to go and you'll never go."

While in Migori, Miller and Imthurn worked in a "mobile clinic" to hand out medicine. The "clinic" was just a vacant building that at one point was supposed to be funded but never was.

"It was a really impactful day," Imthurn said. "They heard we were coming."

Some people walked for miles just to have a few moments with a health provider. Imthurn and Miller encountered people living with diseases like AIDS, scabies and malaria, as well as those suffering from chronic pain because of having to work so hard every day to farm their land and stay alive.

"We saw about 80 people in about seven hours," Miller added. "There were only two doctors."

Miller explained that while this area of Kenya is not the poorest by African standards, the people of the Kopanga region have no income opportunities.

"The problem out there is it's very rural," she said. "It's a long way from any city so there's not a lot of industry so people don't have jobs. Most people are subsistence farmers, so they just grow what they need and they can't make any profit off it."

In this area, kids are lucky to get to the eighth grade. It can cost up to \$500 for one student to graduate to high school, which is celebrated in exciting scholarship ceremonies.

"These kids were awarded pencils. Pencils," Imthurn said. "They were thrilled over getting pencils and pens. They would clap and be excited over pens and pencils that we throw away."

One of the programs P4P brings to these communities is the Power of Milk, which educates mothers and caregivers about the importance of nutrition for growing little ones while supporting their diets with foods like Plumpy'nut, a peanut-based paste that helps with malnutrition.

"There would be 3-year-olds that are still being held and they look like 10-month-olds or 8-month-olds, and they had no muscles because there's not nutrition," Imthurn said. "It was so heartbreaking, the babies."

In the 10 years P4P volunteers and supporters have been working in the Kopanga region, they have installed water catchment systems at schools, provided girls with sanitary hygiene kits so they don't have to miss school during menstruation, educated farmers about seeds and fertilizer and helped cooperative groups earn money in their communities through small business grants.

Imthurn and Miller said this group is far from a hand-out organization. They plan to continue working with P4P and hopefully return to Africa in the next couple years.

"One thing that really hit me was we were at this (school) and the principal stood up and he said, 'You know, there's a lot of people that help in life, and walk through your life and leave footprints in sand.' He said, 'But P4P leaves footprints in cement,'" Imthurn said. "I'll always remember that. It was beautiful."

Info: www.partneringforprogress.org (<http://www.partneringforprogress.org>)