

# life

Courtesy of CACHA/Darren Calabrese



Dr. Don Kilby, seen here in Kilema, Tanzania last October, co-founded the Canada-Africa Community Health Alliance in 2001 to help provide care to people in need.

## Hope floats

*A houseboat clinic created by the Canada-Africa Community Health Alliance is bringing care to remote areas of Gabon*

by Joe McAllister

FOR MOST RESIDENTS of Ottawa, a houseboat is for a mobile vacation on the Rideau Canal, which winds its way through the heart of the city.

To the members of the Canada Africa Community Health Alliance (CACHA) a houseboat—or a boat on pontoons—is an opportunity to set up a floating clinic that will serve some of the poorest and most needy people in the African country of Gabon.

The CACHA's floating clinic is expected to be operational sometime in June, and the Gabonese government is committed to supporting the project financially. CACHA is working with a local partner in the Ngomo region of Gabon who will staff the boat and use it to provide basic care, minor surgery and certain specialized practices, such as gynecology.

### Fundraising

The group is also determined to raise \$125,000 to keep the boat operational for three years, and if they come up with the money the government of Gabon will spend another \$700,000, some of which will go to sponsoring other medical missions in Gabon, and possibly more floating clinics.

"We're at the point of bringing health care to very remote villages," said Dr. Don Kilby, "The purpose will not only be

to serve the HIV centres along the river," but staff will be able to address other health needs in communities they visit as they float down the river.

The boat, which was built in Quebec, was designed by a company in Smith Falls, Ont. The simply designed barge is 9 metres long and 3.7 metres wide, with a low draft to enable it to get into shallow water. It has solar panels for electricity and includes a fridge for transporting samples. The process of shipping the boat to Africa will involve volunteer help to disassemble the boat to prepare it for its long trip.

The CACHA has been seeking unique ways to serve the health needs of African nations since the alliance was started back in 2001. It was founded by Dr. Kilby, the head of the University of Ottawa's student health services, with Marcel Hamelin, former rector of the University of Ottawa, and Antoinette Strazza, an educator who was health promotion coordinator at the university.

Dr. Kilby worked with some of the African teams that attended the Francophone Games in Ottawa in 2001. He was already interested in providing antiretroviral care to HIV-infected patients in Africa and, as he became interested in the lives of these young athletes and the daunting challenges facing them, the ideas that inform the CACHA started

taking shape. With help from the Canadian International Development Agency, the alliance made its first medical aid trip to Gabon in 2002.

### Holistic approach

Since becoming interested in providing care to Africa, with special attention to the huge number of people who are HIV-positive, the original members of the CACHA realized they needed to take a more universal approach to providing health care. Although they found in 2002 that 7% of the population in Gabon's villages were HIV-positive, providing care only to HIV or AIDS patients would not necessarily be well-received in countries where AIDS patients are still stigmatized and where there is such a great need for health care of all sorts.

"You have to have a holistic approach," said Dr. Kilby, "A targeted approach may only further stigmatize AIDS patients. . . . They (advisers to the alliance) were wise to tell us to go in with an approach that provides for medical care and medicine for everyone."

CACHA has projects in three other African countries: in Tanzania, Benin and Uganda.

The Tanzanian mission was set up after an exploratory trip to the country's rural Kilimanjaro region in 2003. The poor in this mountainous area suffer from a high rate of HIV infection. The most recent mission took place



Boat photos courtesy of CACHA

The houseboat's huge pontoons (top) and clinic walls are loaded into a shipping container, to be reassembled later in Gabon.

this past winter, but in the fall of 2008, 23 CACHA volunteers visited nine villages over nine days, giving out more than 12,859 free prescriptions, performing 94 surgeries and testing more than 2,000 people for HIV.

As in Gabon, the alliance partners with local health-care providers in Tanzania in an effort to improve health infrastructure in the country. The projects are not always medical. One Tanzanian project involves helping plan and provide gardens for HIV-positive patients, the better to ensure they receive good nutrition.

Originally, CACHA was a project of the University of Ottawa Health Services, but it has now grown to encompass volunteers and donors from the entire Ottawa area and beyond—to other universities such as Queen's and service clubs in cities like Toronto.

"The University of Ottawa Health Services have always been innovative," says Dr. Kilby. It has been involved in community health, inner-city health and methadone clinics serving the often poor residents of the neighbourhood where the university is located. He praises the attitude of the university's leadership. "These are all administrators that have seen the value of extending these services to the community."

He says the reason community health is part of the name is because the alliance

remains true to its community health roots—which involve issues such as clean water, housing and nutrition, and not simply medical care. One of the reasons he agreed to become involved in the U of O's student health services is because he was promised he and the service could reach out beyond the university and its students. Almost immediately the service became involved in issues such as treating injection drug users and patients with STDs.

"You just fall into things in life," Dr. Kilby says of his journey from being a family physician to serving the university, to working in the local community and now working internationally. "I've never regretted the path. . . . It's been really exciting."

And it is a very cost-effective way of delivering care. Over the last five years, the 200 or so active members of the group have raised millions for work abroad—\$1 million last year alone—but, as Dr. Kilby proudly notes, "Most of the money comes from people who go on missions with us." On average they pay \$4,000 for two weeks. "I'm proud of the volunteers who come forward. The members work hard," says Dr. Kilby.

Those interested in helping or donating to the CACHA can contact the alliance at its website, [www.cacha.ca](http://www.cacha.ca) or donate at the Canada Helps website, [www.canadahelps.org](http://www.canadahelps.org).