

Rotarians in Africa help to rebuild

Sent to paint, wire AIDS clinic, end up building it instead Not-so-young volunteers had to get creative getting help

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

KILEMA, Tanzania—What's a Rotarian to do when a trip two years in the making starts with the sight of a large hole in the rich, red Tanzanian soil where a half-built medical centre is supposed to be?

If you're Danforth-area chiropractor Paul Truelove, you start smashing windows. Then, with your "older, less handsome" brother Stephen, you provide the technical know-how to reframe the ancient windows, build casings for wire screens and chisel out 80 years of mouse dirt from a run-down local school attended mostly by AIDS orphans.

In essence, when a "sweat equity" trip to paint, plaster and wire a new HIV/AIDS centre at a Catholic hospital near Mt. Kilimanjaro bumps up against the inflexibility of Murphy's law, 19 Toronto-area Rotarians simply roll up their sleeves.

"I wish we were staying another week; we've barely gotten started," said Ron Spiewak, who came for two weeks with his wife Linda and suitcases loaded with medical supplies, antibiotics, candy, ball caps and soccer balls.

What the team really needed was power tools.

Instead they got innovative with rudimentary tools like heavy rocks and nicked drill bits.

It was like spa boot camp, joked Caroline Sweig, flexing muscles tightened by twisting rebar as she carried a box of water down a steep, precarious footpath to the school's construction crew.

Mississauga's Chris Snyder, who as leader of the trip watched his recruits make manna of misadventure, lamented the phantom HIV centre, calling it crucial to the hospital.

"They're at a crossroads; they're just bulging," he said of Kilema's program, where the infection rate is double the rest of the country, owing to an intersection of roads leading to Tanzania's main trading centres and into Kenya's coastal towns.

With the collective age of the volunteers adding up to somewhere in the neighbourhood of 1,200, there were few who could last a whole day swinging a pickaxe, mixing cement, carrying stone or laying blocks for the new clinic.

So the group got creative in their attempts to help.

For Anne Fisher, enrolling a depressed young man into a nearby mechanics program was like a return to the kind of work she once did on a psychiatric team at Sunnybrook & Women's Health Sciences Centre in Toronto.

Lynn Bird, meanwhile, was charmed by the chiselled cheekbones of 17-year-old Cellina Leon, who has a dream of becoming a doctor one day. She and her 14-year-

old brother were orphaned by AIDS, they live with their aunt and at least six other children. Bird followed them into their home, a tiny shack a half a day's walk from the hospital, and pledged to adopt them financially.

Debra Selkirk, a communications specialist at Winners, scoured outdoor market stalls in search of sandals and running shoes that would fit 9-year-old Stephen, living virtually on his own except for the occasional visit from an abusive older brother known to steal and sell anything of value donated to the little boy.

Meanwhile, life at the African hospital continued unchanged: an average of four babies were born each day; dozens of patients trudged up the long, rocky, switchback roads leading to the hospital; the morgue filled and emptied — most pitifully with a mother and one of her newborn twins.