

?Small Project? makes big difference in lives of Kenyan students



By Brock Weir

So many of us take maternal health and convenient family planning for granted.

A quick trip to your doctor, or even your drugstore can often do the trick, but we're lucky here in Canada; in other parts of the world it is a daily struggle.

It is a daily struggle which recently got harder when the incumbent United States government slashed funding for maternal health initiatives around the world, but Newmarket's Pickering College is doing what they can to help fill in the gaps.

Janet Downer, Pickering College's Director of the Middle and Senior School, recently returned from Kenya where she presented a cheque for \$5,000 to just one such project providing reproductive and women's health care in the country's rural areas.

The money was the result of the school's Staff Social Justice Fund, an opt-in program for faculty and staff to donate an amount of their choice to a reserve fund that is then used to support worthy organizations around the world and close to home.

Community Health Africa Trust (CHAT) was introduced to Pickering College through the school's existing relationship with The Small Project, an organization whose mission is to provide education, health care and wildlife conservation in central Kenya. The organization is run by Rex Taylor, a former teacher at Pickering College. Small by name and design, the organization provides a number to essential programs to clients including access to education through its support of boarding students ? two of whom are sponsored by Pickering College's students ? and support for the much-needed mobile health unit run by CHAT.

?Rex came to our school and made a compelling presentation about the mobile health clinic, so our social justice group decided we would make a contribution? says Ms. Downer. ?This year, because I was going to Kenya to see the students in The Small Project, I spoke to our Fund's coordinator to see if we could possibly make another contribution to the mobile health unit. A lot of the funding for these types of organizations has been withdrawn by the American government, so they are definitely in need of that support.? Needless to say, the cause didn't need a passionate pitch, despite there being more than enough passion to do the job and, once on the ground, Ms. Downer was able to see firsthand just how far \$5,000 can go in the rural communities.

Mobile health clinics focus not only on reproductive counselling, but also AIDS testing and basic health care. While the mobile health clinic has wheels, the organization also facilitates a camel clinic to get to areas impassable to vehicles. Well ahead of the clinic's arrival ? however it ultimately arrives! ? mobilizers are sent off ahead to surrounding areas to inform residents the service would soon be in their area.

People in need walk for miles to get there on the appointed day ? and on Ms. Downer's appointed day, they were stationed in a camp for internally displaced people.

?Everyone is lined up to speak to a nurse or one of the health care providers at the clinic,? says Ms. Downer. ?On the day we were there, we were able to observe a procedure of a woman who already had four children and said at that point she didn't want to have any more.?

The patient received a simple five-year contraceptive implant, inserted just under the skin of the arm, an invaluable procedure for a device that costs less than \$10 a piece.

?It was a very exciting moment for me [to hand over the cheque],? says Ms. Downer. ?I was very proud that we were able to help them in that way. The clinic made arrangements so they would be in the same area we were so we could see what they did and present the cheque to them in front of the other clients. I felt when I came back I had a greater understanding of what The Small Project does in supporting the clinic and sponsoring students. Being able to meet those children face-to-face has given me a new resolve to make sure we continue to support this project.?

And a little goes a long way. The low cost of the contraceptive device is just one example. At The Small Project's boarding school, just \$800 enables a child to receive an education, three meals a day and a bed.

?It really changes the lives of these students.?

Pickering College's Staff Social Justice Fund has supported a number of additional causes in recent years, including the building of a school and community centre for the people of the Chippewa First Nation on Georgina Island, disaster relief funding following the Fort McMurray wildfires, and assisting a Syrian family as they settled in the local community.

For more information on The Small Project, including how you can contribute, visit www.thesmallproject.ca.