

NEWFIELD NEWS

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2010
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Gardens Link Schools on Two Continents

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In fall 2008 Newfield graduate Laura Smith applied for and received a grant for \$1,500 from United Way Youth Philanthropy to start a garden on the campus of her alma mater. "It was used to build the fences and to make well blocked-off beds," said Linda Poppleton, Laura's mother and partner in Growing Hope Together, a non-profit established by Laura in 2007. "Bricks delineate the beds. The beds are three-feet by six-feet; there are nine of them. Each kid gets their own plot and they choose what to plant and grow." The Emery Memorial Garden is next to the Kelloggs Corners schoolhouse.

The larger vision of the Newfield garden project includes a garden in western Kenya. Smith graduated from Newfield High School in 2003 and in her senior year at Cornell went abroad to east Africa. "In Kenya I was mostly in Nairobi, but also traveled to western Kenya," Smith recounted. When she encountered the rural poverty of the lake region, where the father of her host family had grown up, she decided that she wanted to do something to change conditions there. "I asked the Kenyans, 'What do you want to do?' Their third language is English, after their tribal language and Swahili, so I decided I would write grants for them."

As an undergraduate Smith's campus employment had involved grant writing; it was something she knew how to do and was difficult for the Kenyans. "I talked to the chief of the village and the headmaster of the school, and there was a lot of talk about 'What is sustainable?'"

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Growing Hope



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Eventually their attention focused on the school children. "All the cooking was done over open fires, which were not ready when the kids went off to school," said Smith. "So they would go all day at school without eating, and the teachers were having a hard time keeping their attention." So Smith wrote a grant to fund a school meal program.

AIDS has greatly reduced the adult population of large areas of Africa. "It has devastated the farm work force," Smith said. "Agriculture education is not part of the curriculum anymore, and fields are not being worked." She wanted to reintroduce the children to agriculture. "So they know how to grow up in their own village and make agriculture work," she explained, "and not have to move to the cities, where there are really no opportunities."

The garden in Simenya, Kenya on the shore of Lake Victoria is almost two acres in size now. "Most big projects tend to fail in east Africa," Smith said. "The garden does not entirely feed the school, but it has been completely adopted by the Kenyan school. I just show up sometimes and talk to them about it."

Smith looked at Simenya, and she looked at Newfield, and she saw two rural communities that historically had

agriculturally-based economies. She wanted to make a connection. "I approached [former superintendent] Bill Hurley and told him about the gardening project in Kenya," Smith said. "A partnership between the two schools was attractive to Hurley because he always wanted to open up Newfield students to the rest of the world." Hurley approached Newfield teachers with the idea and got the most response from the third grade. One of the modules in the third grade curriculum is "Communities." The teachers involved include Jon Armstrong, who was Laura's third grade teacher, and Sue Shults. Elementary school principal Vicky Volpicelli is also a strong supporter of the project.

"Laura fell in love with Kenya and grew close to her Kenyan family," said Poppleton. "She started her own non-profit, and then her younger sister got involved. We were all just in Kenya in March." Last week Erin Smith gave the third graders a lesson in how to transplant properly.

"It's a gardening project with learning units about African countries," said Poppleton. "They learn about the differences between the schools, between the animals. We do a lot of slide shows." After graduation Smith went to work for Cornell Cooperative Extension, working to develop the satellite farmers' markets in Trumansburg, Groton and Danby. "We hired 14 to 16 year-olds to work at the

farmers' markets and delivered nutritional education at the markets," Smith said. "Interest in gardening is growing." She then moved on to the Cornell Food and Brand lab. "They study why people eat what they do," Smith said. "We want to encourage kids to eat healthier." She will be starting her Ph.D. in international nutrition in the fall.

"We just planted the other day," said Poppleton. "Over the summer Laura, Erin and volunteers will take care of the garden with some help from the kids in the summer rec. program." Volpicelli is eager to involve the summer campers in the maintenance of the garden. "They will have small programs during the harvest [in the fall] where they make salads. Most of the vegetables will go to the Newfield food bank."

All of this was begun by a college student after a semester in Kenya. "The families [in Kenya] opened their homes and their hearts to me," Smith said. "That doesn't happen much in the U.S. It's sounds corny, I know, but it made me think, 'What can I do to give back?'"

For more information see www.growinghopetogether.org.