

Newfield Schools Make Kenya Connection

By Beth Skwarecki

Growing Hope Together, a new non-profit organization founded by Newfield native Laura Smith, celebrated its first "basket party" last weekend as a fundraiser for the project, which aims to connect students from the communities of Simenya, Kenya and Newfield, over the shared cultural commodity of food.

Though they are thousands of miles apart, the classrooms will communicate with each other electronically; Smith is traveling to Kenya this week to set up a computer lab in the Kenyan school. Meanwhile, schoolchildren in the two areas will each grow a garden. In Simenya, where land is plenty and farmers are few, the school has two acres to work with. In Newfield, the garden is different: a quilt block design with a dozen square plots, each three feet square.

Smith says she was inspired to start Growing Hope Together after several trips to Kenya, starting when she was a student in 2006 and participated in a study abroad program. With a background in nutrition, she researched how community networks can improve food security, without outside aid, to improve the health of local families and children.

Although she stayed in Nairobi,

her host family was from western Kenya. In 2007 she returned to Africa and visited this area. She learned that near Simenya there is enough land and enough rain to support farming. But the community is in crisis, with rates of HIV/AIDS as high as 30-40 percent of the population. "You'll find families of grandmothers with 15 children they're taking care of. The working age people, the farmers, are dying," Smith says.

As a result, the community has enough land, but not enough people to work it. And the children are not learning about agriculture so that they can one day grow their own food. Agriculture is no longer taught in the schools. So most families buy their food, or receive it through one of the few aid programs that are available in the region, says Smith.

She spoke with chiefs in the town and headmasters at Simenya's primary and secondary schools. "I got involved in listening to their ideas, finding out what could improve their schools and issues in their community" Smith says, thinking at the time that she would help them write some grant proposals. But early this year, the idea of involving schools in Smith's hometown, Newfield, brought Growing Hope to life.

Newfield Central Schools

2-1-1 Tompkins Adds Internet Chat

Just a year ago 2-1-1 Tompkins celebrated the launch of its expanded information and referral service by introducing the easy access 2-1-1 dialing code. Now 2-1-1 Tompkins has introduced a "live chat" feature for those who prefer the internet to the phone when asking for help.

By visiting www.211tompkins.org, individuals in need of help finding community services can now click on the "Need help? Ask live!" box on any Web site page whenever "Online" is displayed in the box. Inquirers receive the same assistance they would receive if they called the 2-1-1 number through a live chat exchange with

an information and referral specialist. Visitors may type in questions and needs related to health and human services and get answers to their questions and information on services that can meet their needs.

The chat service is available Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. E-mails seeking assistance can be sent to 2-1-1 Tompkins from the site during off-chat hours and will be answered within 24 to 72 hours, depending when the request is made. The online resource directory that users can navigate on their own can also be found at www.211tompkins.org.



Photo provided

Schoolgirls and family members from Simenya, Kenya, with the baskets they made. Laura Smith is in the front row at left.

Superintendent William Hurley supported the project as a cross-cultural opportunity for students in the district. Many of the children don't leave the area until a class trip to Washington, DC in the eighth grade. This project, Smith says, will "make the world a little bigger" for them.

The students in Kenya also live in a rural community where children rarely get the chance to travel. "A lot of them haven't met Americans. Their beliefs about us come from rap videos and political things in the news," says Smith. Interacting with American students over something that they have in common — food — will make their world bigger, too.

Although the project will involve students in many grades, Smith says the Newfield district's third-grade teachers were the first to work the project into their curriculum. Students will focus on African villages in a unit on communities, and will grow flowers in the garden for a unit on butterflies.

Work so far has focused on forming partnerships with organizations in western Kenya and finding interested teachers on both continents. Both communities will begin work on their gardens next spring. This past weekend's basket sale fundraiser will bring much needed

funds for the garden in Kenya, where a fence, storage house and irrigation piping must be set up before farming begins.

Half of the money from the fundraiser will go to another organization, the Western Kenya Girls Scholarship Fund. In Simenya, the primary school is free to students (although families still have to pay for books and uniforms). The secondary school across the street, however, charges tuition. Students who don't do well in primary school, or whose families cannot afford tuition, may never get the chance to attend secondary school, which includes grades nine to 12.

Because the society in Kenya values males more than females, Smith says, women are often not able to go to secondary school. If a family only has enough money to send one child to school, it will usually choose a son.

The Western Kenya Girls Scholarship Fund pays the fees for 10 of the community's girls who otherwise would not be able to afford to attend. The baskets are made by these girls, along with their mothers and grandmothers.

The baskets, supporting both organizations, are available at Stella's Barn and through the Growing Hope Together at www.growinghopetogether.org.

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