



Maple Ridge charity builds a better life in Malawi

George Klassen sits with students at the school built by Project Wellness in Malawi this past summer.

By Robert Mangelsdorf - Maple Ridge News
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It was seven years ago that Maple Ridge's George Klassen first travelled to Africa and learned of the plight of the children of Malawi.

Stricken by drought and devastated by disease, the tiny land-locked country in central Sub-Saharan Africa is home to more than one million orphans, despite having a population of 14 million. More than 10 per cent of the country's population has AIDS and the average life expectancy is 38 years, leaving many children without a parent to raise them.

Klassen, who had long performed missionary work with the Amazon Evangelism Society in South America, had been invited to take part in missionary work in Nigeria.

There Klassen heard about the dire circumstances in neighbouring Malawi and travelled there to see the conditions first-hand. He was introduced to a group of more than 100 orphans in the town of Ntcheu who had banded together for survival.

"They had three years of drought and had to walk three miles every day just to get water," says Klassen. "They had nothing."

The responsibility of fetching water fell literally on the backs of the girls. Even if school was an option, they would not be able to take advantage of the opportunity.

Klassen realized that if the children had access to clean water, not only would there be less of a risk of contracting malaria or other water-borne illnesses, it would open up opportunities for the children to attend school.

So Klassen adopted the entire group of orphans he met, leaving them with enough money and food until he could return.

"I told them I would be back in a year, and I would build them a well," he said.

While returning home, Klassen found himself on a plane next to an Australian man and told him of his intentions to drill wells in Malawi.

"It turned out the guy owned a drilling rig, and we negotiated a price right there," says Klassen.

Two months later, Klassen was back in Malawi, drilling wells, and Project Wellness was born.

In the years since, Klassen has made repeated trips to Malawi. Project Wellness has already drilled six wells in Malawi this year, making it one of the most productive yet.

In total, Klassen and his group have dug 20 wells, providing potable water for close to 20,000 people, and have built an orphanage and a school for the children in the area.

Next to the school, Klassen and his group purchased land where the children could grow crops. Half of the produce they grow they will feed the children, while the other half will be sold at market.

"The goal is to make them self-sufficient," says Klassen.

To that end, Klassen is currently trying to raise money to build a maize mill to be used by farmers in the village. The mill will allow local farmers to process their corn and fetch a higher price. The village will also be able to charge farmers from neighbouring towns to use the mill.

"The mill will change their lives," Klassen says.

However, at a price tag of \$30,000 to \$35,000, the mill won't come cheap.

Klassen is hoping to raise enough funds to build the mill during his next trip to Africa.

"Any way we can get the money, we'll do it, we have faith," Klassen says. "But the money dictates what we can build."

Project Wellness is a registered non-profit charity, and unlike larger charitable organizations, the group has no paid staff, so all money donated goes directly to helping the children of Malawi.

"We're all volunteers," says Klassen. "We've got a pretty good support group, so that lets us get a lot done."

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• Donations can be sent to No. 405 12090 227th Street, Maple Ridge, B.C. with cheques made payable to Project Wellness or Amazon Evangelism Society.