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'Happiest faces you have ever seen'

Osseo man leads water project for Tanzania

by Deb Schreiner

Why does a retired engineer devote full-time energy to getting wells dug for villages in Africa?

Jim Vanderheyden said it was the unforgettable reaction of the villagers when clean water flowed for the first time. After nine days of continuous work, the drilling company got

the old well pump to work. It was the last day of his group's first visit in May 2005.

"The villagers heard and came running with their buckets. The picture on our website

shows teenage kids with their buckets. They had the happiest faces you have ever seen in your life over a bucket of water," Vanderheyden said.

"That's what drove us to come home, form a nonprofit company, and the rest is history," he added.

It all started earlier that year when Vanderheyden's daughter, Lisa Vanderheyden, was talking with her friend, Janet Wheeler, an Episcopalian priest.

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Wheeler had hosted a Tanzanian priest during a conference, who told her of the desperate need for clean water in his home village in Tanzania.

Wheeler wanted to do something to help. She and Lisa rounded up eight people for the first trip in May 2005. Among them were Vanderheyden and his wife Katie.

While Vanderheyden worked on developing local contacts in Tanzania, Lisa Vanderheyden and her friend raised money. "They managed to raise \$15,000 in about three months," said Vanderheyden. "It was incredible!"

He said it costs about \$3,500 per person to travel to Tanzania.

Seeing firsthand the despicable water conditions, the inaccessibility of water, and the desperate toll AIDS has taken on families, Vanderheyden was spurred to start the Tanzanian Life Project (TLP).

Their objective is to install (or repair) five wells in 10 years. They are working on number three at this time.

Vanderheyden said the first well at Mtumba was repaired and distribution lines and points were added for about \$50,000. Installing a new well, building a reservoir

and adding distribution lines and points can cost as much as \$100,000, he said.

The day after the well became operational, the villagers washed themselves and celebrated.

TLP was also instrumental in getting electricity to several points in Mtumba, as well as providing assistance to AIDS victims through a partnership with Abbott Labs.

TLP also gave some women \$25 grants that enabled them to get small business loans. As a result, the village now offers a restaurant, pottery and tool-making businesses, among other new enterprises. The village has grown from 4,500 to about 6,000 people, according to John Vanderheyden, Jim Vanderheyden's son.

The second village, Chisichili, had been saving money for years to drill a well. "Collectively, the group had saved maybe several hundred dollars," John Vanderheyden said. "But to them, this was an unbelievable amount of money."

Jim Vanderheyden said the cost to bring clean water throughout Chisichili was about \$100,000.

Initially the villagers were digging miles of trenches through rock with handmade tools.

John Vanderheyden said, "I thought there was no way they could go through rock with those

tools. They said, 'We start a fire on top of the rock, wait till it's really hot, and then use our tools to chip away at it.'" Men, women and older children worked all day at that task, he said.

The goal is to bring water within a half mile of the villagers' homes. That may require as many as 20 distribution points, since the villages are spread out over several miles.

TLP is also working on bringing electricity to Chisichili.

Relief for AIDS victims, their families and orphans is a priority as well. Thanks to a grant from Abbott Labs, TLP was able to help 60 AIDS orphans and 120 AIDS victims in the past year, said Jim Vanderheyden.

"There are children taking care of children," added John Vanderheyden. "Both parents died from AIDS. We'll see a 10 year-old walking around with a two-year old."

Impressed with the work TLP was doing for AIDS relief, Abbott Labs doubled its grant for the next year.

TLP is hoping to drill a well for a third village, Kisima-Cha-Ndege.

John Vanderheyden said the biggest challenge for TLP is the slower pace and lack of resources in Tanzania. "It takes time to adjust to work at their pace through problems that would take minutes



From left, Mary Vanderheyden and her father-in-law, James (Jim) Vanderheyden hand out Minnesota-made soap to villagers in Tanzania. Jim Vanderheyden chairs the Osseo-based Tanzania Life Project, a non-profit organization that digs wells and provides other services to Tanzanian villages.

Mary Vanderheyden is a former Brooklyn Park resident.

or hours here and weeks and months over there," he said.

TLP representatives pay for their own travel expenses, John Vanderheyden said, which means 96% of donations go toward projects.

Jim Vanderheyden spends his "retirement" working at least 40 hours per week coordinating projects in Tanzania. He also established a sister organization in Tanzania that employs two people to

work with local contractors and agencies.

"When you go over there and see what can be done with a little money and organization, you come back and say, 'It's stupid not to do something,'" he said. "It's not right — these people don't even have water!"

The goal is to help Tanzanian villages create self-sufficiency, John Vanderheyden said. When the children get educated and realize their potential,

they often want to return to their villages and give back. The Episcopal minister who got this whole project started is a great example, he said.

For more information and to view pictures on the Tanzania Life Project, go to www.tanzanianlifeproject.org, or call Jim Vanderheyden at 493-9107. The TLP office is located at 12-6th St. NE, #108 in Osseo, zip code 55369.