

SPOTLIGHT ... on GDHS's Me to We project

By **EAMONN MAHER**
Staff Writer

A group of students from Georgetown District High School got a chance to see first-hand the fruits of their fundraising labour on a recent trip to Kenya.

Thirteen students, along with the school's Canadian & World Studies & Humanities department head Laura Edge, visited the Maasai Mara region last month for 11 days, breaking ground on construction of a school, interacting with Kenyan youths, embarking on a safari and learning the Swahili language.

The "Voluntour" was a Me to We social enterprise project as part of Canadian Craig Kielburger's Free the Children charity and provided the students a glimpse into the Maasai culture, which actually only makes up about two per cent of Kenya's population.

"GDHS has been fundraising for Free the Children for many years now through the Social Justice League because they often have different fundraising events," said Edge, who took a group of GDHS students to Costa Rica in 2007 for a Habitat for Humanity project.

"Now we actually had this opportunity to see where the money was going and how it was helping those people in the pictures and posters that we kept looking at. People back here would ask us if we wanted to take donations or books or toys or something to hand out, but this trip wasn't about that. It was more of a hand-up than a handout, just going there with

our knowledge and leadership. We were there to learn, but also to help empower the people of the community. They got something out of it and we did as well."

Staying in a camp surrounded by an electric fence, the students were accompanied by three Maasai warriors for most of their stay and for transportation used a military personnel carrier referred to as a "lorry" to traverse the mostly unpaved and bumpy roads.

Teachers in Kenya were on strike during the locals' stay, but the students still went to Sigirar Primary School with their uniforms on at 5 a.m. and were eager to spend time with their North American visitors, with most able to speak English well. It made for an emotional farewell ceremony.



A "lorry" was the mode of transport for GDHS students on their trip to Kenya. Pictured above (front, from left) are: Ally Bodrug, Maasai Warrior John "Tops", Caylee Brydie, Erica Toth, Dave Hyde. Top: Matthew Edge, Tanner Leckie, Laura Edge, Briana Courtemanche, Rowan Radley-Walters-Hall, Kirsten Schwegler, Abbey Beckett, Tasha Stephenson, Rebecca Marks, Nicole Sherratt.

Submitted photo

ny, with the Kenyan youths dressing up in traditional Maasai clothing.

"I met this 16-year-old, his name was Josephat, and we were talking about our lives and comparing everything," said

Grade 11 GDHS student Matt Edge, Laura's son, who said he's now much more conscious about saving electricity than before the trip.

"Then he told me not to mourn what you don't have, but to celebrate what we do have, and that was a big part of the trip for me. It made me appreciate what we have here."

The visiting students took a day-long safari on their lorry and stopped at a lookout location at the Rift Valley to watch migrating animals such as giraffes and elephants, along with countless of species of birds.

There were a couple of days of hard work for the GDHS students as they used pick-axes and shovels to remove rocks from the foundation of the new school.

They also participated in nightly discussions about issues facing Africans in general, such as finding alternative incomes, health, water conservation, education and security.

"We talked about those issues and also worked on action-planning, so kids started brainstorming on things they could do going forward," said Laura Edge.

"We might see some initiatives may be coming out at GDHS in the next school year and some more fundraising for Free the Children."

Many of the students took on part-time jobs or received financial support from relatives to help pay for the cost of the trip, which took a year and a half of planning.

Other memorable aspects of the tour for the group included seeing fruits and vegetables being harvested from an organic farm—as well as a community well to provide clean drinking water for the resi-



Sure, they received three meals a day and stayed at a secure camping area at night, but it was hardly "glamping" for a group of Georgetown District High School students on a recent trip to Kenya as they also cleared rocks and boulders from the construction site for a new school.

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dents— thanks to donations from abroad; trying to sleep at night with hyenas, wild dogs and other mysterious noises just outside their perimeter; and attempting to lug huge jugs of water strapped to their heads on a 20-minute Mama walk that the Maasai women would make four or five times a day to provide water for bathing.

The students also discovered that wealth in the region is measured by the number of cows a family has and that children as young as six or seven are tasked with herding sheep or goats around the farm.

"I kind of think twice about a lot of things now," said graduating student Kirsten Schwegler.

"You weren't really grieving about going to a place where people are less fortunate, but it makes you feel grateful and want to help. It did change my feeling about getting involved because the camp facilitators described to us their path to what they're doing now, and it's easy to get involved with Me to We or Free the Children."

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