

The Namibia connection

By Bob Owen
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Most employees take the opportunity to get away on their vacations. Not Cramahe Township CAO Merlin Dewing. He went half way around the world to provide assistance to other municipalities for 2.5 weeks in November.

The father of two teenage daughters headed off for his third trip to Oshakati, Namibia leaving behind the chill November winds for 40-degree plus temperatures of the southern African country.

The trip from Canada to Windhoek, the nearest airport in Namibia, takes 49 hours. Oshakati, where he was working, is another 800-km drive from there.

The trip was part of a program run by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to share expertise in city management and good governance.

Mr. Dewing became involved in the program when he was Port Colborne CAO. That municipality was matched to Oshakati and agreed to send staff to assist. Mr. Dewing admits he wasn't eager to go the first time but on that evaluation mission, he saw an opportunity to help. He became much more supportive.

Subsequent to his first visit to Africa, Port Colborne decided it didn't have the resources to continue. A multi-disciplinary team was needed.

Last spring, Mr. Dewing moved to his position in Cramahe. He has continued his work in the Namibian city as part of original team.

The November trip to Namibia was his second this year. The next one is scheduled for May 2003, but he hasn't decided if he will go. When he moved to Port Colborne, he agreed his daughters could finish their secondary school education there. Julia, his younger daughter, finishes in the spring. His 18-year-old daughter Stacy starts at Fanshawe College in January. The two girls currently live in Port Colborne with their mother and Merlin's wife of 30 years, Roxanne.

When he goes to Namibia, Mr. Dewing uses his vacation time. As it is now, he sees his family only on weekends.

Finding municipal solutions

The members of the FCM team have been dealing with a lot of municipal issues. Oshakati is a blend of tribes and high tech. Some of the most sophisticated banks are located 500 metres from fields of grass huts and sheds where native peoples have squatted. The municipality has to service both.

It is one of the fastest-growing communities in Namibia. Its population of 35 thousand is growing by ten per cent a year. Most of the incomers are squatters. On one weekend a field will be open. On the next it will be saturated with the huts of tribespeople who feel they can park themselves wherever they want.

Basic concepts like taxation, debt collection and how to deal with theft of water are being developed. As well, the country is only a dozen years removed from apartheid, leaving it with racial issues and rampant poverty. In the evenings children swarmed the parks, begging. It is a country of disparity. You will see lots of

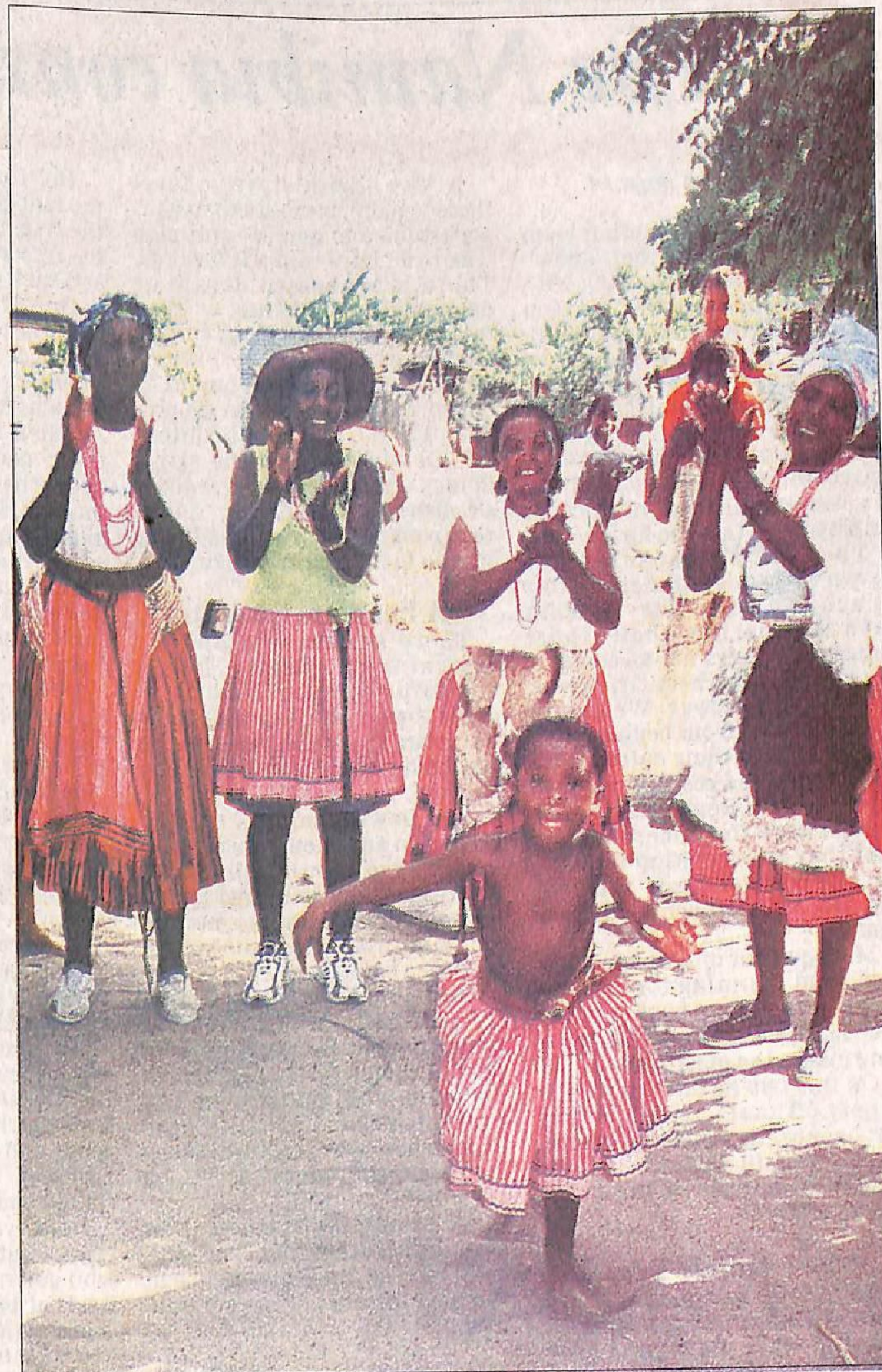
BMW's and a lot of people with nothing, some selling sticks to clean your teeth.

Also in the mix are the tribespeople who do not consider themselves poor if they have land and water and can sustain themselves.

When you park your car in the city, you hire a guard to watch it. Despite that, he says that safety isn't an issue if you are smart. You don't walk at night. In the nature parks you follow the instructions of the signs and stay in your vehicle.

An even bigger issue than poverty is AIDS. People he met on his first visit weren't there a year later. They had died of 'consumption'. Many of the children are born with the virus in their system.

As a precaution, he took his own needles with him in case he needed an injection of any kind.



WELCOME!

Following a meeting with a women's group to discuss local issues affecting women, team members were treated to impromptu entertainment by drummers and dancers.

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