

Children in the East African village of Igoma unpack books and school supplies sent from Stouffville.



Helping needy African children satisfies group

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

Sylvester's crooked legs have been straightened. While the five-year-old undergoes therapy at a clinic in his hometown in East Africa, he continues to pull at the heart strings of members of a Stouffville-based committee.

"Sylvester's a wonderful little guy," Stouffville-Igoma Partnership chairperson Peter Neufeld said. "His legs were damaged by rickets which is caused from a severe vitamin D deficiency.

"After the surgery, Sylvester shared his Mwanza hospital bed with three other children. He's now at home, getting regular visits from the clinic nurse and his future looks promising. Sylvester will walk."

When a partnership between Stouffville and the 40,000-person African village of Igoma was struck in 2003, no one knew what would develop. After all, the town's humanitarian partnership with the poverty-ridden town was the first of its kind in Canada.

"As well as being part of Sylvester's recovery, we've made enormous strides for the quality of life in Igoma," Mr. Neufeld said.

You just have to do the math to see what's been accomplished, Mr. Neufeld said.

For instance:

- Igoma's new health clinic, built by a work crew from EastRidge Missionary Church, now treats 800 patients a month;

- More than 1,000 people were examined recently by the Lions Club at the clinic's eye-examination program;

- Twenty-five new chairs are now in the clinic's waiting room;

- About 500 mosquito nets to ward off malaria are on their way;

- At least 60,000 school supply items were sent to Igoma by Stouffville's Summitview Public School and

- Three committee-funded vocational students have graduated and numerous medicines, a malaria-detection unit and a hospital CAT scanner were shipped to Igoma.

The committee has raised more than \$100,000 in two years.

"It all goes to Igoma," stressed committee treasurer Joe Nemani, a retired IBM executive.

This past summer, committee members joined two work crews from EastRidge Missionary Church and spent three weeks volunteering in Igoma.

After paying their own expenses, the crew built a house for the clinic's doctor, tiled the roof and installed a sand-filtration system, assessed the need for a water-purification system and distributed mosquito nets to families throughout the village.

While there, the crew spent time with the clinic's nurse. Glenna Cummings of Markham is marking her first volunteer year running Igoma's health clinic.

Ms Cummings delivers babies, teaches hygiene and nutrition, treats a multitude of conditions and injuries. After a 12-hour day, Ms Cummings often e-mails Mr. Neufeld at his Ballantrae home to give him the day's news.

Justin Kerswill, 25, of Stouffville joined the work crew in Igoma.

"It was an incredible experience," Mr. Kerswill said. "I went to see if I could make a difference. The people of Igoma, while very poor, welcomed us. I helped build a roof on the clinic, installed windows and doors and went door-to-door handing out mosquito nets."

Malaria remains the number one killer in Africa, claiming 3,000 children a day.

"The mosquito is the culprit," Mr. Neufeld said. "With a net, the children have protection while they sleep."

While the average household income in Whitchurch-Stouffville is about \$90,000, a mere \$300 a-year comes into the average Igoma home.

"Igoma's economy is basically on the barter system with people scrounging for food," committee member Larry Simpson said. The Ballantrae vegetable farmer has visited Igoma three times.

"Life in Igoma is starting to change," Mr. Simpson said. "It's one person at a time and one project at a time."

For more information on the Stouffville-Igoma Partnership Committee, visit www.sipartnership.org or telephone 905-640-1771.

York Regional Newspaper Group reporter Joan Ransberry is a member of the Stouffville-Igoma Partnership committee.



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