

Today's Forecast:

L 63 H 78

Mostly sunny

Fri	L 10:46m	H 5:04pm	Mon	L 1:02pm	H 7:27pm
Sat	L 11:34am	H 5:54pm	Tues	L 1:44pm	H 8:12pm
Sun	L 12:19pm	H 6:42pm	Wed	L 2:26pm	H 8:56pm

Women's Well of Love Overflows in Tanzania

BY CHRISTINE CHAGARIS

Call them women on a mission.

Old Greenwich's Susan Rohrer and Riverside's Lisa Oram's Old Greenwich-based nonprofit organization, Children of Tanzania, has a motto: "Building a better world for children, one child at a time."

Many of this East African country's poverty-ridden villages are testimony to the positive impact the organization has had in the region. Children of Tanzania's main focus is improving overall education and welfare for children.

However, it also has succeeded in with initiatives that do not stray far from its main focus. These projects include building wells for clean and accessible water, administering a lunch and vitamin program and providing children with necessary school uniforms.

Every July since 2002 when she founded the organization, Rohrer has traveled to the region for a month. She pinpoints areas that need aid, and her organization sets out to fund and initially oversee projects.

Children of Tanzania also works in tandem with other organizations, such as Greenwich's Christ Church and Tanzania's Rift Valley Children's fund. They help with continual management of these initiatives to ensure that they are being used effectively.

The road to establishing the organization was a unique, if not unexpected, one for Rohrer. "I was on a safari," she said, speaking at her Old Greenwich home. "I stopped in a village to hand out toys, and was shocked to see that the kids weren't in school. A uniform is mandatory at government-sponsored schools, and the families couldn't afford what amounted to a \$14 school uniform. I thought it was ridiculous."

Moved by the conditions she saw, Rohrer sprang into action and began raising money when she returned home. "We had cocktail parties here in Greenwich, and the money we raised I took over there to help get necessities for the village."

She said that raising the initial money was not complicated. Seamstresses from the village were assigned the task of making the uniforms, so both the children and local enterprise benefited.

Oram pointed out other reasons for the importance of uniforms. "Besides being mandatory, people don't realize that Tanzania sits at a very high altitude, so it gets cold in the evening. The kids need to be kept warm when they are out. Also, wearing uniforms helps build up their pride and self esteem."

Friendship Blossoms into Partnership

Oram's involvement with the organization stemmed from her friendship with Rohrer. (Their now-nine-year-old daughters were also friends.) Rohrer's original partner in the organization, Rosarii Falvey of Old Greenwich, was starting her own business and had other commitments.

Oram came on board soon after and now is its vice-chairman and treasurer. She has a background in finance from working on Wall Street. Oram had gone to Kenya and Tanzania on safari, like Rohrer, and also became familiar with the region.

"Both Susan and I are passionate about Africa as a whole, and after visiting there, I got a really different view of the culture and was touched by what I saw."

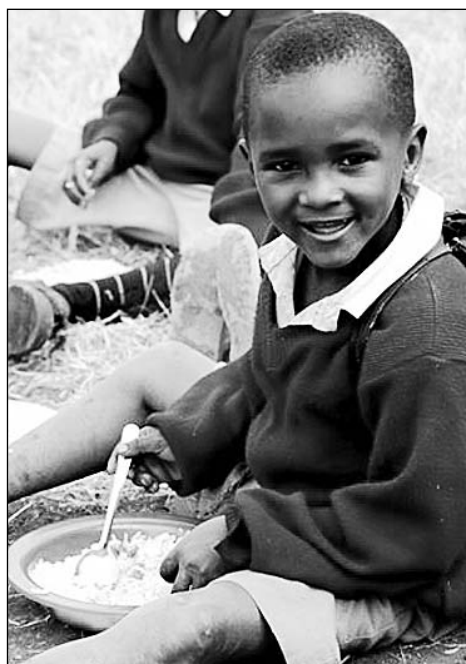
Tanzania's average per-capita income is \$319, and that figure is estimated to be even less for the native Maasai tribe. The country is ranked fourth poorest in Africa, so Rohrer and Oram knew that they had to "roll up their sleeves" and get busy on projects where there was the greatest need.

Last summer, Rohrer traveled to Tanzania



Contributed photos

Old Greenwich resident Susan Rohrer is the co-founder of Children of Tanzania. Last month she visited the village of Meali in the East African country to assess needs and to get a first-hand account of the progress being made there by the organization.



A young boy from the Meali village enjoys his lunch, made possible by funding from Rohrer's organization.

The well below not only brings much-needed clean water to the community, but it also frees young girls' time so that they can attend classes at a school.



to help launch a lunch/vitamin program at the Meali Primary School, which serves boys and girls from K through sixth grade.

"The children hadn't been getting lunch," she said. "We raised \$22,000 to hire cooks and provide food for a year."

Additionally, they raised \$13,000 to continue the project into the second year. "Meali really represents how our organization has grown," she said proudly.

The pride on both women's faces is evident when describing what a difference the project made. "It's so rewarding to see the children holding out their lunch bowls and singing," said Rohrer of this past July's visit. The Rift Valley Children's Fund oversees the project for Children of Tanzania.

One factor the organization seeks to avoid is spreading itself too thin. "We don't want to take on too many projects that we can't follow through on," said Rohrer. "It's interesting how one project flows into another, though, so we really have our work cut out for us."

She cited the example of how providing school uniforms led to providing food, which in turn led to increased enrollment. Teachers in Tanzania are not trained, so children mostly learn by rote with no textbooks. The organization is looking to change this.

Building and Repairing

"Our other goals for Meali are to repair teacher housing, build new classrooms and repair old ones, and provide essentials such as textbooks, blackboards and desks," said Oram. This year, Rohrer brought some school supplies on her trip.

Children of Tanzania has begun to build a second classroom at the Endupoto Primary School in a Maasai village. Rohrer pointed out that many villages don't have schools.

"The elders of the village came out and greeted us on this trip. They were very interested to hear our plans for the classroom."

She noted that many of the elder generation still do not see the value of an education, so they are still "iffy" about its benefits. This project is overseen under the auspices of Christ Church, which funded the school's first classroom.

There may not seem to be a connection

between clean water and access to education. However, these factors are very much linked in Tanzanian villages.

"We built our first water well in Rugu Village last spring," said Rohrer. "People don't realize that without an adequate and clean water supply, young girls have to walk many miles just to bring jugs of water to their villages. They miss out on an education because they then don't have time to learn."

She said that the villagers are being taught how to manage the well so that it stays sanitary. A second well is planned for the coming year.

There are the personal success stories, too. There is Neema, a 10-year-old whom the organization sponsored after hearing about her repeated sexual abuse by a family member. She attends boarding school now, and was placed in a "safe house" for her visits home.

"She was so traumatized in the beginning, but now she is a totally different child, fluent in English and doing great," said Rohrer.

Then there is the law student who was also sponsored. He is going to return to his village upon graduation from Tanzania's Dar-es-Salaam University to become involved in land rights.

There are the Maasai women who make hand-beaded star ornaments. The profits help their village and benefit their microenterprise of sorts. "Women over there don't really have a voice, and jewelry-making is a small step to help them attain one," said Rohrer.

"We only go into projects that are viable and that we can realistically take on."

It seems as if the continent of Africa is a source of deep pride for her family as well. Her son, 23, studied in Africa for a year, and her 21-year-old daughter accompanied her on this past trip. There is one up-and-coming family member who yearns to make the trip.

"My nine-year-old daughter hasn't gone yet but really wants to. It's a long trip, so I want it to be a positive experience for her."

"When you can make a difference in a child's life, it's so rewarding," said Rohrer.

For more information on Children of Tanzania, call 637-0191 or go online to www.childrenoftanzania.com.