Summer Vacation: Building a School in Uganda

There will be a new school in Uganda this fall, thanks to the work a group of Butler students did during the 2007-2008 school year.

The Power of Children, a campaign started by the Butler chapter of Ambassadors for Children, has raised more than $40,000 to build the primary school for 350 children ages 4-14 in the Wakiso District of Kampala, Uganda's capital city. From June 9-21, seven participants from Butler will travel there to begin construction.

“Education is going to empower these kids with hope for a better future,” graduating senior Michael Hole said.

Hole started the Power of Children last fall, after a group of Butler students came back from Uganda and told him they'd seen kids who had a desire to learn but no place to do it.

“They would go to school on the weekends,” he said. “Every chance they had to get their hands on books, to learn math and speak different languages, they were doing that. But they were meeting under a tree or in a barn. They needed a safe place where they have teachers, desk, chalkboards and all the educational necessities we take for granted here.”

He met with the Butler chapter of Ambassadors for Children, a not-for-profit organization that serves children around the world through short-term humanitarian service trips and sustainable programs. During a meeting at the campus Starbucks, he laid out his idea for a fund-raising campaign that would include selling T-shirts, bringing in guest speakers such as the Lost Boys of Sudan and holding a golf outing.

There was some skepticism, Hole said, because raising $35,000 – the initial goal – was daunting. But others shared the dream. Fellow students Keith Adams, Rebecca Scherpelz, Marcus Hagberg, Kelsey Hendrickson, Beth Kristinat, Erin Murphy, Lena White and Jennifer Pignolet, along with Chemistry Professor Robert Pribush, who serves as advisor, all played integral roles in pushing the Power of Children campaign forward.

Pignolet, the new president of the Butler Ambassadors for Children chapter, said going to Uganda "completely changed the way I look at my life, particularly in the area of education."

“Until I saw the children, I didn't believe it was possible for kids to want to come to school on Saturday,” she said. “That's just how strong their thirst for knowledge is.”

They kicked off the fund raising on Sept. 11 and, after a few slow months, good things started happening. A letter to friends and family netted a couple of $5,000 donations. Dublin Coffman High School in Ohio – the alma mater of Scherpelz, whose enthusiasm for Uganda inspired Hole's interest – held a kickball tournament that raised $8,500. The students donated the proceeds to the Power of Children.

“It's neat to see the amount of support you receive if you put your heart out there and tell them this is what I'm passionate about and this is what's needed,” Hole said. “That speaks to people, I think. When you'd tell them about it, you'd see them light up and get excited about what we were trying to do. It was something unique, something that hadn't happened at Butler before. It was a big goal, but I think people wanted to be a part of it if it was going to happen.”

With $40,000 now in hand, the Power of Children participants will be able to build a slightly more elaborate school than they'd originally planned. (As for how you build a school for $40,000, Hole said labor, materials and other costs are considerably cheaper in Uganda. And the organization Building Tomorrow is negotiating to get the land for the school for free.)

Hole said he doesn't know exactly what he and the other Butler students will be doing when they get to Uganda. They might be digging a foundation, building walls or doing any number of tasks required to complete the 2,200-square-foot school.

But all the participants are excited and ready to go. Pignolet, who will be blogging about the trip at indystar.com, said she proud to be part of this effort.

“Partly because Butler has never tried anything like this before,” she said, “but also because it's not just about writing a check. It is important to give money, but being able to see firsthand how far that money goes gave me a very different perspective. I can't wait to go back and get to work on our school.”