

Communities now have access to water and women are becoming self-reliant

MARK'S 'CRAZY PLAN'

By Margaretta wa Gacheru

Eugenia Konya had never been to Lake Magadi in southeastern Kenya before she met Mark Steele, an affordable housing developer and a member of the Rotary Club of Evanston (D6440, USA). Nor had she been a community organiser let alone a microfinance consultant before her father met Steele in the States and suggested the American link up with his Kenyan family who could help him carry out his 'crazy plan' to bring clean water to arid or semi-arid parts of Kenya.

"I've been constructing affordable housing in the States for many years. So when I began working on a sustainable development project in Tanzania and realised how severe the problem of access to clean water was in Africa. I felt I wanted to see if I could do something about it," said the idealistic Steele, who wasn't affiliated with any church, foundation or philanthropic trust when he first arrived in Kenya early in 2012 to work with the Rongai-based Konya family. He has since joined the Rotary Club of Evanston, which made two US\$5 000 grants to Maji Masafi (meaning Clean Water in Kiswahili) the Kenyan NGO that Steele established.

Eugenia was working part-time for the Canadian Embassy in Nairobi when she and her two brothers escorted Steele around the country. He was searching for a community that was "most in need" and logistically most convenient, given that his American work schedule did not allow him to stay in Kenya full-time.

After a month of travelling through rural areas, Steele finally settled on Magadi sub-county not far from the Tanzanian border where not only was access to clean water a critical problem, but also the Maasai women living there were "the most underserved of the underserved." They were precisely the people he wanted to reach.

This is where Eugenia Konya came in.

"I needed to have someone on the ground whom I could trust and who I felt had the capacity to work with the women," said Steele, who hasn't been disappointed with his decision to give Konya the job of site manager of Maji Masafi.

The two of them spent the next month establishing the non-profit organisation and meeting everyone from the area chief and community development officer (CDO) to officials of a chemical company. The company had signed an MOU with Maji Masafi to provide a weekly delivery of 10 000 litres of water to local villages as well as to the military base. Unfortunately, the deliveries eventually tapered off.

Steele and Konya, with introductions from the CDO, also met rural women living in the five villages situated inside the Oldonyo Nyokie group ranch, which stretched from Lake Magadi north to the Kenyan military base.

"At the time none of the women were organised and very few spoke Swahili," said Konya whose first task was to establish five groups to address the problems related to accessing clean water. Nearly all of the women were illiterate.

While Steele was busy raising US\$15 000 in 2013 to buy five plastic 10 000 litre water tanks, Konya was also trying to find short-term solutions when the chemical company didn't come through with the promised water.

"We realised we would eventually need to have a lorry of our own, but in the meantime we had to rent a water truck to deliver water to all five villages once a week," added Konya, who personally trained the women to manage the weekly distribution and sale of the water.

The women were so successful in handling the cash that Konya and Steele brought in a financial consultant to help them start 'chamas' (micro-finance projects) so the women could both save



As the project got off the ground, Konya and Steele realised the women would ultimately need to become self-reliant. Clean water has since become a lucrative business for the Magadi women.

and loan funds to each other.

“Mark was amazed when he returned to Kenya in early October and found the strongest women group at Kamukuru had already raised more than KSh1 million!” said Konya, who’d been shepherding the women who quickly understood the advantages Maji Masafi was providing them.

She admits the other four women groups, at Nascrian, Nesamiti, Oldonyo-Nyokie and Ilatramatak were not as entrepreneurial as the Kamukuru group. Nonetheless, they all have raised hundreds of thousands since the chamas started up.

Steele is impressed with the women’s success,

but now he’s got a new challenge: to help them figure out which investment strategy will be the best way for them to improve their earnings.

“The Kamukuru women are already thinking about starting a general store,” said Konya. Although they are becoming more self-reliant, Konya will continue to advise the women.

Margaretta wa Gacheru is a former Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar, who moved to Kenya in the 1970s. She is a journalist with the Nation Media Group and is originally from Evanston, USA, the home of Rotary International.

ROTARY AT A GLANCE

As of 30 Sept.

ROTARY

Members:

1 224 261

Clubs:

35 187

ROTARACT

Members:

194 028

Clubs:

8 436

INTERACT

Members:

429 203

Clubs:

18 661

RCCS

Members:

197 869

Corps:

8 603