

NEIGHBORHOOD

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EXTRA

Rotary clubs are making a world of difference



COURTESY PHOTO
The coordinator of the program leaders for the nutrition program makes a home visit to one of the children in

Dan Blankenau never imagined that his expertise in water would lead to a trip to Africa; not just once, but a half-dozen times.

When the 59-year-old water geologist first met Dr. Charles Erickson, he had no intention of flying 8,600 miles to the Republic of Zambia. The assignment? To identify sites that would likely yield a much-needed resource: water.

Blankenau's life would change following that happenstance meeting as the two men picked grapes at a local vineyard. Their conversation eventually turned to Erickson's pet project in Southern Africa, where the retired Lincoln pediatrician has made a world of difference in an impoverished country plagued by malnutrition.

Erickson has spent the bulk of his 20 years of retirement volunteering as the primary Nebraska contact and medical expert for the Zambia-Lincoln Nutrition Project. Since 2003, Lincoln Rotary District 5650 has collaborated with the Livingstone Rotary Club in Southern Province Zambia and the Rotary Foundation to improve the lives of villagers in Zambia.

The project works with local partners to end child malnutrition through peer nutrition coaching, agricultural innovation and access to clean water.

As the two men picked grapes that fateful day, Erickson spoke of how women in Zambia had faced walking several miles to a water hole, where they had to share the resource with animals.

Erickson told Blankenau that the project could really use the services of a water geologist to help identify sites that would likely yield water. Blankenau, currently president of Coranco Great Plains based in Wahoo, Nebraska, was, understandably, initially overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project.

“My initial response was, ‘Well, I am a water geologist, but I am certainly not going to Zambia.’ Four months later, I found myself on a plane destined for Southern Africa.”

Blankenau paused and added: “Dr. Erickson can be very persuasive.”

A man on a 20-year mission

Lincoln East Rotary Club has had a pipeline with the African country ever since Erickson made his first trip to help the villages there in 2003.

East Rotary has been involved in digging seven wells there to provide water for the villages. The successful wells have not come easily. Several dry, unproductive wells were experienced along the way.

Blankenau’s assistance – providing clean water and sparing the expense of drilling dry holes – has helped immeasurably. He has done geological research to locate potential sites for wells.

Rotary has recognized his contributions by giving him its Rotary Service Recognition plaque.

Over half of Zambia’s 20 million residents live in poverty.

“In southern Zambia, civil servants make around \$3,500 (in U.S. dollars) per year; in remote villages, less than \$500,” said Blankenau.

He added, “I’m humbled by the people who are willing to work with us. I’m touched by the happiness and generosity of the people there ... they’re so destitute, yet so hardworking.”

He said he draws his inspiration from dedicated volunteers such as Erickson.

“Our overarching goal is to prevent malnutrition, especially ‘stunting’ (being short for age),” which is a common health concern in the country,” said Erickson. His work in tracking normal child growth patterns is expected to result in nutritional improvements in eliminating stunting.

Erickson, now 85, said his 11th trip to Zambia was probably his last.

First-Plymouth lends a hand

First-Plymouth Church in Lincoln has stepped up in a big way to help the effort in Zambia.

The church’s support of the project prompted one of its members, Shari McCright, to join East Rotary and to ultimately embark on her first mission to Zambia last fall. McCright, a retired teacher who’s familiar with the behavioral strategies that promote learning, will help to teach proper measurement in infant length and work with local villagers to maximize their strengths for sustainable improvements in family nutrition.

McCright’s trip last fall included a meeting with a new local Zambian partner, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), to develop a strategic plan for future implementation along with the local Zambia health department, including the director of health and a nutritionist.

“We’re in good hands,” said McCright, who plans a return visit to Zambia later this year.

Rotary District Gov. Barbara Bartle added: “The Rotary Zambia collaboration provides a testament to the power of partnerships and showcases the role of Rotary serving society in a global way.”

Church compiles data

The active outreach program at First-Plymouth, located at 2000 D St., has embraced the Rotary/Zambia partnership by processing data of the growth of Zambian children (weight and height) and forwarding it to Erickson.

Church member Maureen Ose said a grant covers the data-collecting process and supports nutritional goals, as well as empowering residents in Zambia to eventually process the information themselves.

“I’m encouraged by the improvement I see in the monthly numbers we receive,” said Ose, whose monthly reports cover an average of roughly 16 children. “It also flags if there’s a problem with a particular child.”

Rotary relief

This year, the Zambia-Lincoln Nutrition Project is being expanded for an intensive two-year collaboration to broaden the project to a new village in Zambia (Lifilale). Rotary clubs from Lincoln, Seward, Beatrice and Omaha combined to raise \$11,500, which received a match of \$11,500 from Rotary District 5650 designated funds and a \$9,200 grant from the Rotary International World Fund for a total sum of \$32,200.



PHOTO BY DENNIS BUCKLEY

Lincoln East Rotary Club member Shari McCright, who traveled to Zambia last fall as part of the Zambia-Lincoln Nutrition Project, chats with East Rotary Club member Wayne Casper at The Garage, where East Rotary holds weekly noon luncheon meetings on Wednesdays.



COURTESY PHOTO

The successful dam, canals and gardens in Siandwaze – a model for future villages. The dam/canal/gardens were part of Dan Blankenau’s work. The Rotary nutrition program has worked with the mothers and children on nutrition in the village of Siandwaze, all benefiting from this water access.