

Man's Africa connection shows true Christmas spirit

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By: Rachel Maclean

John Bossuyt's life changed in a matter of seconds.

On a trip to Kenya in 2008 he was helping to pass out school books to children when he stepped outside for some fresh air.

Across the courtyard he noticed a man sitting under some bushes and felt compelled to strike up a conversation.

"It's what I heard from that man that transformed my life," said Bossuyt. "As long as I breathe air I will never be the same. . . . He said to me 'the hard part for me is knowing that the same beautiful children you are passing books out to this afternoon will in the next few years be horribly violated, and if per chance they escape the violation they will be required by their mother to go out into the night and collect coins.'"

Right then and there, everything changed for him.

After returning home it was hard for him to enjoy a extravagant meal, exotic vacations or fancy clothes.

"I know that a fancy meal is worth more than one months income over there," he said.

Even after two weeks at home he just couldn't get his thoughts off Kenya, and quickly returned in December 2008. He bought large volumes of food, and went to personally give it out to 29 widows and 65 kids.

He also brought soccer balls and Christmas gifts while visiting internally displaced people (IDP) camps to distribute the goods.

"As soon as you put the soccer ball in front of the children they were gone," laughed Bossuyt.

But he wanted to do something more, and with help from his wife Beverly, started a charity called Compassion Africa.

Since his first trip, John has been back to Kenya five times. The mission is to "edify, encourage, and empower the women so they can support themselves," and in doing so they can support their children. John said the key is to help women to be self-sufficient.

“That’s what they want,” he said.

“They don’t want handouts.

John said one major culture difference is the women do everything: fetch water, tend crops, and raise the kids.

“It’s the women that have inspired me,” he said. “It’s the pain experienced by these women that draws me back.”

So John and Beverly are packing their bags in January and relocating to Kenya to help run the charity.

Currently they are helping to keep people in 10 homes alive in a little town called Solai, which is three hours west of the capital Nairobi.

But John said right now they struggling to keep food on those table.

“Their situation is grave,” he said.

Each of the 10 homes is run by a grandmother who is looking after not only their grandchildren, but other kids orphaned by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

“There has been little to no rain there for seven years, and the hunger and thirst is rampant,” said John.

He said if you offered the kids a choice between candy and bottled water the kids would take the bottled water because it is so expensive to buy there.

With a small group of volunteers, including help from a local woman named Rachael, they are trying to make a difference. John and Beverly are also collecting clothing, sewing machines, and cookware to help the women in Solai have a future.

“We want to thank the people of Cochrane who know of us and are supporting us,” he said.

John said Mary Lou Davis of Bentleys Books has offered to collect clothing, but he is also getting a steady stream of clothing donations that is starting to overflow from his house.

Partly thanks to Bonnie Bend from Great Things in Store, who donates her extra clothing to the cause.

“I think we have a responsibility to help out in anyway,” said Bend.

When all the clothes are packed up they are shipped to Kenya on a freighter where a member of the Compassion Africa team comes to pick it up to make sure it gets to the right place.

Other plans include getting the women to start their own businesses with microloans. One example would be supplying a sewing machine, and then a small loan to buy fabric.

While Beverly has never travelled to Kenya, the couple plans to really get involved when they arrive in Kenya.

John said working in the slums is what really captured his heart.

For right now though he is wishing everyone in Cochrane a Happy Holiday.

In this season of giving, if anyone is interested in making a donation contact John Bossuyt at john@changingthings.ca