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Del Mar resident works with Rotary to bring wells to remote Kenyan village

RUTH MARVIN WEBSTER
For the North County Times

RANCHO SANTA FE ---- When Dennis Onyango, a young man from Kenya, came to study at San Diego State University on a Rotary scholarship three years ago, he told Rancho Santa Fe resident Steve Brown about his dream: Having clean water for his village.

In the Migori region of western Kenya, where Onyango's village is located, 27 percent of the children did not live to the age of 18. Many died from water-borne illnesses such as typhoid, cholera and dysentery.

Women and children walked five miles to the closest muddy river, a tributary of Lake Victoria, to transport the water back home. The nearest water pipeline is nearly 100 miles away.

Today, with the help of Brown, Rotary International, and the tiny Newport/Priest River Rotary Club in eastern Washington where Brown and his wife own a vacation home, the community of Agenga has 10 new hand-pump wells that deliver safe drinking water.

"We expect that this project will increase life expectancy, help relieve the labor burden and enhance the living condition of some 10,000 people," Brown said at his home last week.

Sitting in his comfortable ranch-style home, large windows overlooking a pool outside, Brown said he recently returned from a trip to Kenya to check on the well project and several other Rotary humanitarian endeavors.

"One well needs a little more work," Brown said, "but the others are working fine."

Brown said he also attended an All Africa Rotary Conference in Nairobi. To date, Rotary International, an organization of business and professional leaders, has provided nearly \$70 million for various humanitarian and educational programs in Africa.

Brown has been involved with Rotary projects for a decade, inspired by a vacation he took with his father in 1984 to five eastern Africa countries.

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"I became enamored with the demeanor of the African people," he said. "They were so pleasant and warm."

An attorney with Luce, Forward, Hamilton & Scripps in San Diego, Brown, 55, said the law firm has encouraged his volunteerism.

"I'm thankful that they're so supportive of my sitting in the law office and doing humanitarian work," he joked.

For most Rotary projects, feasibility is the first question and cost is the second, Brown said. The Kenyan well project cost about \$50,000, half of which was provided by Rotary International in matching funds.

Once the money was raised, a handful of volunteers from Washington and Idaho, whom Brown calls "really handy guys," traveled to Kenya on an investigative trip, then returned to dig the wells and put in the pumps. The handful of Americans spent a month working on the rehabilitation of a few wells built in the 1960s that weren't working, and routed water from a spring into four wells that were producing.

"The guys bought picks and shovels," he added. "They bunked out and hired a bunch of people from the village for assistance."

For over 10 years, Brown has worked with Rotary to initiate humanitarian projects in Africa. One such project is a school for street boys in Nairobi, another is the Kenya Widows Association that trains widows with children to make a living as seamstresses.

Brown checked in with those schools on his latest trip, and also attended the building dedication for Mugima, a boarding school for Massai girls that Rotary International built. The school once operated out of a chicken coup but now provides clean, equipped classrooms for 45 girls.

"Steve Brown's contributions are from the heart," said Larry Scott, district governor for the Rotary in Southern California. "He's so genuine, there isn't anything he wouldn't do to help someone." In November, Brown traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to Jahalabad where Rotary is building a school.

For Brown, it seems, extending a helping hand just comes naturally.

"While we were visiting Dennis and checking on the well project, we met a woman named Judith Oyugi who lives on Mfango Island on Lake Victoria. Twenty thousand people live on the island but there are no cars, no roads, and no electricity," he said. "Judith told us they need a fence built to keep the hippos from eating their vegetables. We might have a new project there."

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