

Elmer Thienes Teacher Returns from Tanzania

March 23 was Elmer Thienes-Mary Hall School's annual Multicultural Day, a celebration of the school community's heritage. Each year the students wear clothing that represents their heritage, present rhymes in various languages, prepare posters and displays, and sing songs from various countries.

The music, art, food service and world language departments work with the school's diversity committee to prepare a day of song and celebration. Some years there have been dance performances by outside groups, or presentations from various non-profits.

This year was different; the day featured presentations by Elmer Thienes' own world traveler, Louise Plack.

Plack traveled to Tanzania for the first time with the organization Pocketful of Joy to help in educating, feeding, clothing and assisting with health issues of students in the Bukoba district of Tanzania.

Plack and Charlotte Hunter, founder of Pocketful of Joy, left the country Jan. 19, and returned March 16, full of stories, pictures, music and artifacts from Plack's adventures in the villages. As part of the program, they lived with the Tanzanian directors and became part of the village.

Throughout Multicultural Day, students and their teachers would come into the library for a PowerPoint presentation about her trip. Plack was dressed in some of the clothing she had made while living in the Ntoma village and welcomed each class by using the traditional Kiswahili greeting of "Karibu," which means welcome.

She spoke about a day in the life of a Tanzanian student, noting they have to clean their

uniforms several times a week. Tanzanian children are assigned chores such as cleaning the classrooms with a handheld broom made of straw, carrying firewood for the day's lunch-time serving of ugi, along with five gallons of water for washing, or a sickle for cutting grass at the school. Children walk up to four miles to school each day.

Plack also spoke about Tanzanian children's recreation and their lack of equipment. When students do not have a soccer ball, they make one from plastic bags and tie it with banana leaves. Old bicycle tires become toys to run next to with a stick, tree limbs are cut and used as stilts and swings are made from woven banana leaves.

There are many orphans at each of the three schools Plack visited. Some have one parent, and others have none and are living with relatives or with each other in abandoned buildings.

Pocketful of Joy provides ugi for the orphans, as well as pens, exercise books, uniforms, shoes, and medicated and laundry soap. This year all students in every grade received pens or pencils from Marlborough students who donated items prior to Plack's departure. She also brought puzzles, crayons and colored pencils for the library and teachers.

Pocketful of Joy also brought in eye doctors in to assess the students' vision and eye health. Plack assisted with exams and helped dispense medicine and eye glasses once they were ready. Many children were given medicine for ringworm, and several children were assessed further at the hospital for other ailments. Eye glasses are not common, so instruction had to

be given as to how to care for them properly. The dentists had already been to the schools in October, and their visits were also paid for by Pocketful of Joy.

At Multicultural Day, Plack spoke about the education system in Tanzania. Since villages have to build their own schools, Pocketful of Joy has been instrumental in building classrooms, desks, latrines, staff rooms, libraries, cooks' huts, lightning rods and in repairing buildings.

Teacher's salaries are paid by the government, but per pupil expenditures are minimal. Teachers have chalk, and a teacher's manual for the subjects they teach, but not enough student books for each child, so they are shared.

While in Tanzania, Plack spoke to teachers, administrators, Boards of Education and district education officers about what American schools are like. She highlighted what small changes can be made that require very little money, like shifts in attitude and thinking. Plack also brought educational charts for the classrooms.

Pocketful of Joy will be sponsoring a series of seminars to enhance training to teach various modalities, using cooperative groups and the supervision of students as they work. Special education is not a part of the local schools in Tanzania. Children with physical disabilities in mobility, vision or hearing are taught at district boarding schools. Students with autism, Down syndrome, learning disabilities, speech and language disorders are not taught at these schools, or in the local home schools. Students with autism and Down syndrome may be at home and not taught, while learning and speech

issues are not assisted.

Plack spoke to the students on Multicultural Day about the animals she saw daily, such as goats, cows, chickens, geckos in the bedroom, and bird species that were new to her.

She also told the children about traveling a day and a half by bus with people and cargo such as chickens, on her journey to the Mount Kilimanjaro area and to the Ngorongoro Crater for a day safari. There she was privileged to see lions, buffalo, ostriches, warthogs, elephants, hippos, crested cranes, elands, Grant and Thompson gazelles, zebras and wildebeests.

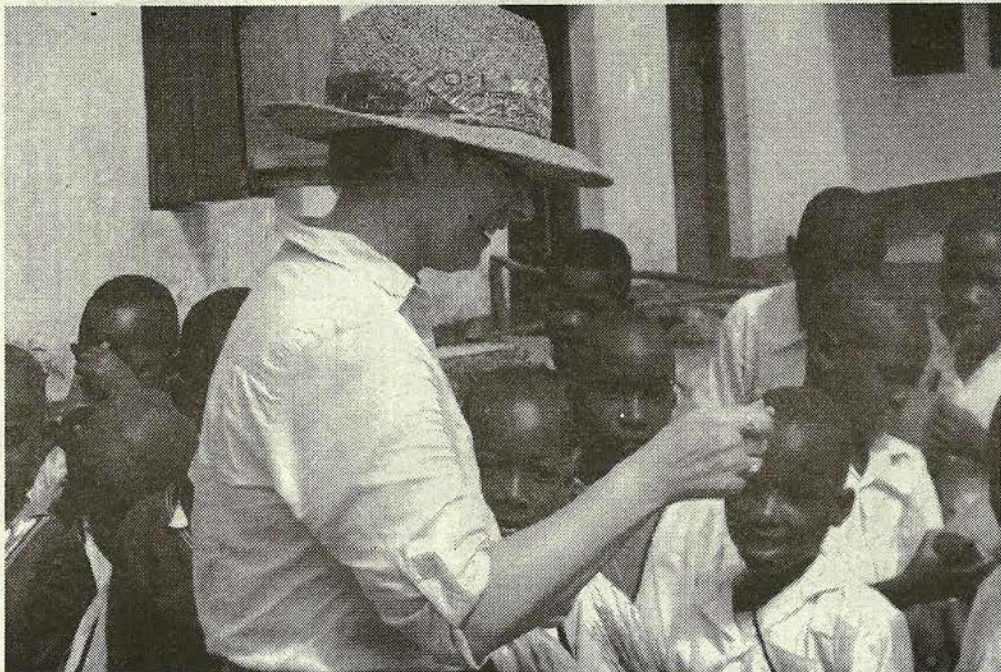
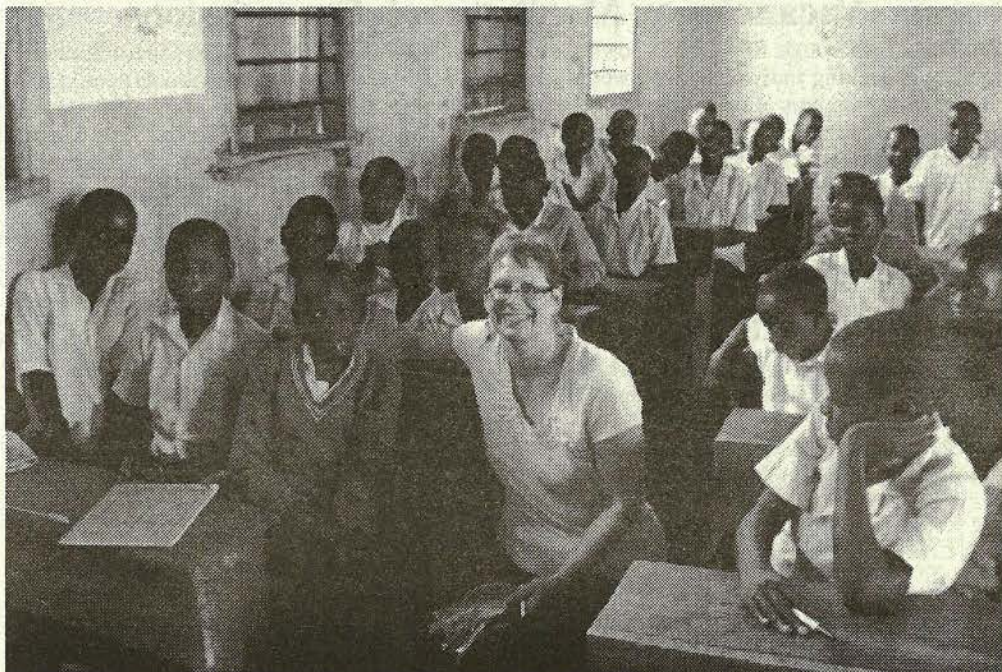
She ate what was fresh, as electricity is scarce in many parts of Bukoba, and very unreliable. There Plack saw her first rice, mango, avocado, cinnamon, peanut, cassava, cava, jackfruit and pineapple plants, and ate them regularly. Fish from Lake Victoria were also eaten daily. Many Tanzanians have an 80 percent vegetarian diet in that area, because every house has a farm, or shamba.

Plack wrapped up each PowerPoint presentation by thanking Marlborough children and staff in Kiswahili, saying "Asante sana," meaning thank you very much. Children followed up by sending thank you letters to Plack, detailing their favorite parts of the presentation, or asking questions that she later answered via email or through another small presentation.

School technology co-coordinator Melissa Kaika added a link to Plack's presentation on the school website, marlborough.k12.ct.us, under news and notes.

For further information on Pocketful of Joy, visit pocketfulofjoy.org.

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Elmer Thienes-Mary Hall Elementary School special education teacher Louise Plack recently gave a presentation to students during Multicultural Day about her two-month trip to Tanzania. Plack went with Pocketful of Joy and worked with local teachers and students. At left she is pictured with students at the Byeya school, and at right, is Plack outside the Nyakataare school.