

Answering the call to help

Robin Mednick didn't hesitate to help when told of impoverished African village

BY CAROLINE GRECH
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When Robin Mednick made a phone call to a friend about two years ago, she had no idea it would unleash a future filled with helping children in a small African nation.

It all started when the Thornhill woman, with four children of her own, was talking to her friend, photographer Dan Galbraith, about his world travels. He was preoccupied with what he had just seen on a trip to the Republic of Niger.

Mr. Galbraith had travelled to Libore, a rural area outside the country's capital of Niamey, where he saw 30 children sharing one pencil in a place with no electricity and no running water.

Deeply affected by what her friend told her he witnessed, Ms Mednick made a decision.

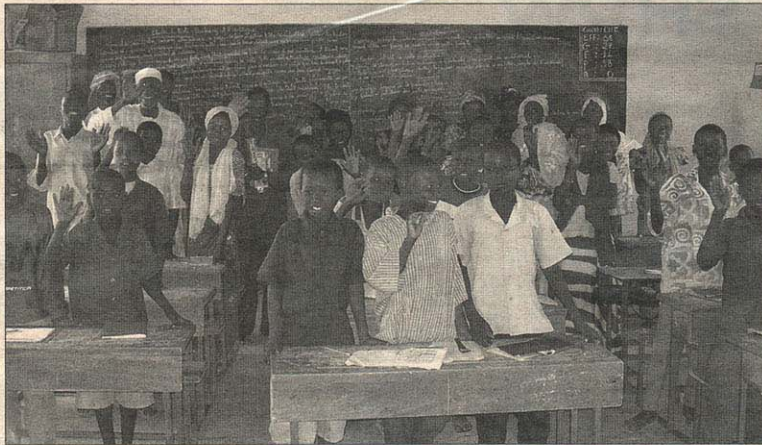
'DO SOMETHING'

"His pain was so tangible and gut wrenching that I said, 'Let's stop talking about it and do something,'" Ms Mednick said.

Hanging up the phone without so much as a game plan, she started to call around to see who could help get school supplies to the children.

Those initial phone calls laid the foundation for Pencils for Kids, an organization which has succeeded not only in getting these children much-needed pens, pencils and notebooks, but in opening up a school late last year.

Ms Mednick received quick



Children in the poor commune of Libore, in the Republic of Niger, now have the use of a new school, along with pens, pencils, notebooks and more supplies, provided by Pencils for Kids. Operated solely on donations, the organization has been helping the school children of the commune for about two years.

support from businesses such as the local Office Depot, thanks to manager Michael Williams, as well as other businesses such as Pivot Design, BIC Inc. and DHL Express (Canada Ltd.), which each offered anything from school supplies to free shipping. On top of that, there was help from complete strangers.

HELP POURS IN

With charitable help pouring in, Ms Mednick got in touch with the Canadian embassy in Niger, which put her in touch with Amadou Madougou, Mayor of Libore, a

commune with 23 schools outside of Niamey.

She asked him for a wish list of things they needed to help the children learn and promptly started collecting it all.

The ease with which people signed onto the cause, not even knowing exactly what was happening, thrilled Ms Mednick.

"It's been an incredible experience," Ms Mednick said. "It's so down to earth. It doesn't take rocket science to hit your heart. When you're passionate, people will help you."

One such instance occurred on her way to Niger, when she met a

man by the name of Peter Enti, an English banker who pulled out \$100 (U.S.) on the spot when he learned what she was doing.

CASH HANDED OVER

She later e-mailed him to let him know where the money was going, and that was when he told her of his colleague who had just climbed the summit of Mount Killiminjaro.

About \$3,400 Canadian in sponsorship was collected for the climb, and he told her they planned to donate it to Pencils for Kids.

To date, they have shipped 6,000 pens and pencils and 1,000 pounds of school supplies to the area.

But last May, the efforts of the seven-person team became a reality for Ms Mednick, the group's executive director, when she took her first trip there.

On that trip, Ms Mednick was able to personally deliver backpacks filled with school supplies.

While the group has seen its fair share of success bringing pencils, pens and notebooks to students who have never had their own school supplies, a bigger dream the organization has been working on was realized in November.

A three-classroom school was built with the help of funding from the Canadian embassy in Niger.

It is in the new classroom where two desks sit, bought with the money given to her by Mr. Enti on that plane ride.

With a school now established, the organization is working on its next challenge of helping bring electricity to the area.

According to her sources, it will take about \$10,000 to connect electricity to the village and Ms Mednick is already working on that goal.

Starting with simple school supplies and working their way up to building a sustainable community, Ms Mednick and her colleagues show no signs of slowing down.

"We want to get them on their feet," Ms Mednick said.

"His pain was so tangible and gut wrenching that I said, 'Let's stop talking about it and do something.'"

With all they've accomplished in two years, Ms Mednick has learned a lesson she can pass on to anyone hesitant to start helping.

"Anyone can do it. No one should feel they need to have money or be famous to do it," Ms Mednick said.

Her husband, Dr. Edward Mednick, an optometrist, also helped by shipping 37 boxes of optometry equipment to Libore.

The success of forging a relationship between a small village in Niger and Canada is only the tip of the iceberg, as far as Ms Mednick is concerned.

Eventually, she wants to help meet the needs of an aboriginal community here in Canada, too.

"It's amazing what you can accomplish," Ms Mednick said.

To donate or for more information on Pencils for Kids, visit pencilsforkids.com



Last year, Thornhill's Robin Mednick had the opportunity to travel to the Republic of Niger and Libore to deliver school supplies and survey the needs of that community. Providing electricity is Pencils for Kids' next goal, Ms Mednick says.

