

# Pencils help erase poverty

Thornhill mom founds charity to help children in Niger by Robin Heron

**SOMETIMES ALL IT** takes is a single conversation to change the direction of a person's life. For Thornhill resident Robin Mednick, one of the founders of Pencils for Kids, that life-altering moment came in the fall of 2005 when she phoned her good friend, photographer Dan Galbraith, intending to make plans for an upcoming trip to Australia.

Galbraith had recently returned from assignment in Niger, Africa, and was having difficulty adjusting back into Canadian life. Sensing distress in his voice, Mednick asked him what was the matter.

"He said he couldn't get the images of the children of Niger out of his head," says Mednick.

"He was shocked at the poverty and the fact that he heard about 30 children in one classroom sharing one pencil. His pain reached out to me, and it troubled me, and so I said, 'Dan, let's do something about it!'"

Wasting no time, Mednick — an executive producer of *The Good Life* radio show and mother of four — called the Canadian Embassy in Niger that day, searching for a way to get involved that would alleviate some of the poverty Galbraith had witnessed.

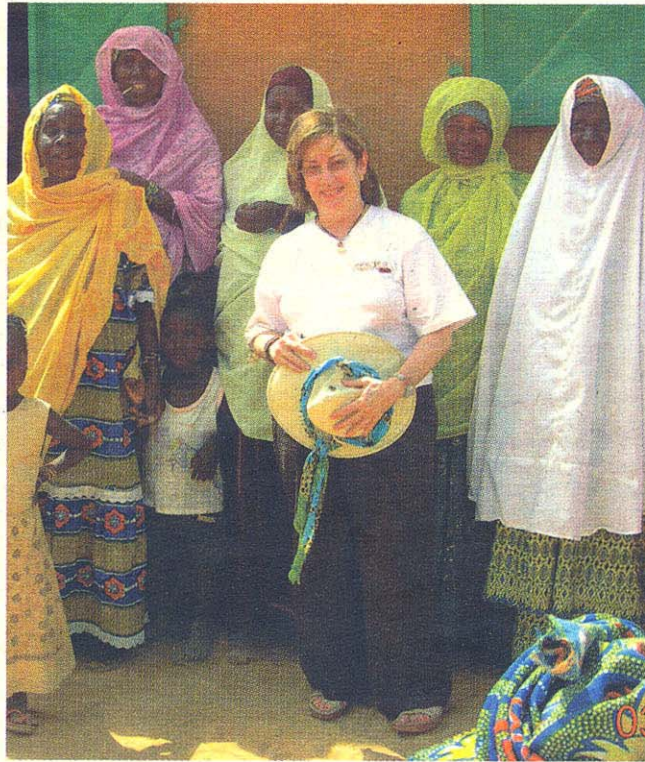
Soon she was put in touch with the mayor of Liboré, a community just outside of the nation's capital, Niamey, with a population of 24,000 and 24 schools. After ascertaining what supplies the community would like as part of a "wish list" for their schools, Mednick set out to create a "test box" to ship to the community. And so Pencils for Kids was born.

When the second package of 100 school bags reached the mayor, Mednick says the supplies were given out in a ceremony to students who had excelled in their studies.

"When you think about it, a pencil offers up a world of opportunity and, for them, it is a mark of pride and a way to show you are educated where here it's something that we don't think about," says Mednick.

"How many pencils are sitting unused in our drawers at home right now? How many do we throw away half used? And there are children out there sharing one among 30 in a classroom. Here we just have so many possessions we just take for granted."

Because of the positive response from the community of Liboré, Mednick and her team of volunteers soon began putting together more boxes and bigger shipments to be shipped to Niger. They also worked to implement a



Robin Mednick in Niger, helping to educate children, one pencil at a time

pen pal program between the students at Dewson Street Public School, Regal Road Public School and the children in Liboré's schools.

Then, last May, Mednick made her way to Liboré, to meet the people she had been working with from afar. It was during this trip that the seed was sown for the realization of an even bigger dream — the building of a new three-classroom school with the help of funds from the Canadian Embassy.

**"When you think about it, a pencil offers up a world of opportunity..."**

"It was built in a community that had never had a school, where the children would have had to walk five kilometres each way to get to the nearest school, and the heat is oppressive," says Mednick.

She speaks enthusiastically about her group's newest project to raise awareness for the plight of Liboré's students: pencil necklaces, crafted by artisans in Liboré.

"We are giving them away to people for a minimum donation," says Mednick.

"We want people to wear a pencil until every child has a pencil, and by having them crafted by local artists, the money goes right back into the community. Ultimately, we want this community to be sustainable, and it's a hope that we will be able to adopt other communities along the way."

Mednick has since returned to Liboré with her husband, an ophthalmologist who brought much-needed equipment to the local hospital, and together they attended the opening of the first Pencils for Kids school, built following her first visit.

"It's less about charity and more about giving to one another because we get so much out of our involvement with this project," she says.

"There's a saying that it doesn't matter what you do as long as you do something, and I think that is so true. You don't have to start with anything big, one step at a time is all you need."

*The Thornhill Post salutes Robin Mednick for taking the initiative to help children by founding Pencils for Kids.*