

On missions of mercy

Spa City resident travels the world for humanitarian work

By PAUL POST

The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Karen Flewelling doesn't need a red suit, a sleigh and reindeer, because to her, Christmas isn't a once-a-year affair.

From school supplies in Guatemala to well-drilling in parched Malawi, Africa, she travels around the globe to finance and personally oversee humanitarian aid projects for some of the world's neediest people.

A longtime girls lacrosse and field hockey coach, she's been overseas nearly two dozen times since retiring 10 years ago.

"I am on a mission," said Flewelling, a Columbia County native who has lived in the Spa City since 1971. "There's so much need. To help a little bit is important. If everybody gave a little bit, the world would be a little better."

Next spring she plans to visit three different African nations — Namibia, Guinea and Tanzania, the latter two to provide potable water.

"In places like Tanzania, the women have to walk six miles to get water for cooking and bathing," she said. "Once they get a well, they'll have more time for education."

Flewelling pays for all of her own travel and lodging, relying on donations from her church — St. Paul's Lutheran on Lake Avenue — and friends to fund various jobs.

"It's very important that I see where the money is going," she said. "That's why my friends give it to me."

One time, for example, African villagers needed a pump for their well because the last one had been stolen.

"I would not fix it unless they promised to figure out a way to secure it," Flewelling said. "So they hired a night watchman. I'm there to help people help themselves."

With each trip, she makes new contacts and learns about more projects — most of which she tackles on her own, making her something of a one-woman Peace Corps. Flewelling shuns formal organizations, which usually involve longer and more structured time commitments.

"It's connections and it works," she said of her strategy. "The more things you find to work on, the more you realize there is out there."

Flewelling is a former Shaker High School coach, physical education teacher and part-time



RICK GARGIULO/The Saratogian
Karen Flewelling displays photos from a humanitarian trip she took to Africa. Flewelling's efforts to help the poor have taken her all over the world.

administrator. Upon retiring, she had two ambitions — to travel and to make the world a better place. So she joined the environmental group Earthwatch, and began working on wildlife projects from deep sea turtles of Suriname to black rhinoceros in Kenya.

With each trip, she tried to help the people she encountered, too, with gifts such as pens, paper and clothing.

"But that didn't do enough because I saw how the people were suffering," she said.

Soon, her focus turned to humanitarian efforts such as buying goats that supply milk — a much-needed source of protein for people living on subsistence-level diets.

Most places she visits are remote areas of Third World countries, so she doesn't have to worry about cutting through red tape. She has pre-arranged contacts, but simply shows up and starts making a difference.

"Any help they can get they accept," she said. "They're so appreciative. You really don't need approval, not from the government."

This September in Guatemala, Flewelling met Robert Morris of Saratoga Springs, a retired



Photo provided

Flewelling and friends pump water in Malawi, Africa

teacher who has started a school in the high mountains for poor children who wouldn't be able to attend school otherwise.

"There's a lot of volunteers going all over the world," she said.

In Namibia, she hopes to visit orphanages, soup kitchens and schools next spring and has tentative plans for an autumn 2009 journey to Nicaragua and El Salvador. As a sports enthusiast, one of her favorite memories was

giving a soccer ball to a group of grateful young men who couldn't believe their good fortune. They didn't even have proper footwear — a mix-and-match of sneakers, some with the toes cut out.

Whether it's winning athletic contests or providing international relief, Flewelling's game plan is the same.

"I try to focus on one at a time," she said.

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