

Woman believes in do-it-yourself charity

BY NATALIE WALSH
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While Karen Flewelling could write a check to her favorite charity and be done with it, that wouldn't be her style. When Flewelling donates money, she insists on knowing how each dollar is spent. This has led the Saratoga Springs woman to travel to some of the most destitute areas of the world to personally see to the needs of the poor.

Her hesitation to donate to large organizations developed out of distrust. "Look at what happened with Katrina. So many people gave from their hearts and where did the money go? Not to the people that needed it. I have to know it [the money] is going to the people who need it," the 64-year-old said.

"I pay my own way. I pay for my flight and my room. Everything I raise goes to the people who need it. I see to that," she added.

Her interest in making a difference and being accountable has led her to literally purchase and distribute goats to hungry African villagers, buy sewing machines so HIV positive women could start a business, go grocery shopping for poor families and buy blankets for women and children who were cold.

In Namibia, Africa, she started a fund to provide street children with uniforms, books and an education. On the same trip, she bought a local soup kitchen a hot plate, a

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KAREN FLEWELLING
Volunteer

large pot and a sharp knife. "This is the one hot meal that many of the poor people get each week," she said.

Flewelling said she has been helping out in her way since 1999 after retiring as a physical education teacher and coach at Shaker High School in North Colonie. She knew she wanted to travel and help in whatever way she could and started by volunteering with EarthWatch Institute, an organization that uses volunteer help in scientific research or conservation projects. With them, Flewelling volunteered on flamingo, zebra, dolphin and sea turtle expeditions.

She also traveled to Wamba, Kenya, a place she describes as "out in the middle of nowhere." While her initial work focused on animals and endangered species, after visiting the places and observing what was going on Flewelling felt she needed to do more for the people.

In Kenya, she donated 28 goats to 25 needy families that had a total of 76 children. The



PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN FLEWELLING

This Costa Rican child holding a new pencil was one of the school children who received school supplies donated by Karen Flewelling.

families had no male head of household and "the milk of these goats provided protein in their diets," she said. This project "can't go bad. It's a win-win" in that it helps poor families to help themselves. It's an idea she

would like to repeat in other poor regions of the world.

Her most recent trip was to Costa Rica and organized by Cross-Cultural Solutions, an organization that has volunteers working side-by-side with local people to achieve important community objectives and initiatives. These include orphanages and child-care centers, schools, health clinics and hospitals, homes for the elderly, centers for people with disabilities, and other community organizations. By working on projects that each local organization has defined and set up, volunteers directly contribute to the objectives of the local community.

"They work with children in day care centers; they teach English in grade schools," she said, explaining some of the work of the organization. One of the contributions she made was to Consuelo Mission Association, a San Jose group that takes care of 100 terminally ill patients and their families by providing them with food, pain medication and vitamins. On that trip she also bought books, pencils, maps and a DVD player and educational DVDs for a local school after visiting the school and assessing its needs.

"I have to know that 100 percent of what I give is going to the cause. When I visited the school I saw that some of the teachers were barely able to teach. They were struggling themselves. I thought the DVDs would be a better source of information for the children to help them learn."

See FLEWELLING, page 5

Flewelling: Assures that donations are well-spent

Continued from page 4

Her hands-on approach has developed a following in Saratoga Springs, where Flewelling lives. By word of mouth, people have learned of her efforts and given her money.

Patrick Ryall has known Flewelling for more than 30 years. He started donating when she bought goats to help the villagers. "I'd rather give to her because if you know Karen, you know that every dime is going where Karen says it is going. I trust her."

Flewelling is currently working on two projects. The first is to build a much-needed well in Malawi, Africa. "In Malawi over 60 percent of the population lives without access to clean water. Women and young girls get up at 4 a.m. and walk long distances to haul water from murky rivers or mud holes. As a result there is a high incidence of diarrhea, dysentery and cholera," she said.

Flewelling has already built a well in a rural area outside of Quito, Ecuador. "I gave them 40 percent of the money they needed. They provided the other 60 percent and did all the physical labor," she said, adding that before the well was built, villagers walked 45 minutes each way to get water for cooking and bathing.

The second project will be to return

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PATRICK RYALL
Friend of Flewelling, who also donates

to Namibia. "I was there last spring and want to continue to help the very poor. Their need is great."

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, where Flewelling is a parishioner, accepts donations on behalf of her efforts as part of their mission outreach program. Pastor James Jaekel said he had known Flewelling for 19 years. "She has a giving heart and really cares for people," he added.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN FLEWELLING

When Saratoga Springs resident Karen Flewelling, right, travels, she likes to get involved. Here she is helping a Costa Rican woman prepare pulp to be used in her paper-making business.

