

Campaign for Africa project surpasses goal

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A brief glimpse into the hardships of life in East Africa has prompted an outpouring of support for a Saanich fundraising project.

The municipality launched the "Zomba Kidz Project" in January to raise \$25,000 for a children's daycare in Malawi.

But fundraising efforts have since exploded to collect \$36,800 after 165 municipal employees opened their wallets, five local businesses began to back the project, and the CUPE, fire and police unions made sizable donations.

"We've had just a wonderful reaction from employees, the unions, businesses and private donors," said Chris Nation, Saanich municipal solicitor and a fundraising committee member.

Saanich will build the day care in partnership with Malawi's Chancellor College and pay the salaries of the employees.

The plan had been to feed the roughly 200 children that will come to play and learn at the facility for three years. But the extra \$11,800 means Saanich can extend its commitment, said Nation.

The day care will be located in Magalasi, a village in southern Malawi near the city of Zomba. The area is considered the poorest region in what is already one of the world's poorest countries.

Childcare is especially important, because an estimated 1 million children are orphaned in Malawi, many from families decimated by HIV/AIDS. The HIV/AIDS infection rate is 14 per cent, the eighth highest rate in the world.

While \$36,800 is a relatively small fundraising project in Canada, the money can go a long way in Malawi. A female-headed household (which is common because the male may have died of AIDS) lives on \$0.84 CDN a day, with an average of six children, according to Malawi government statistics.

When a Times Colonist reporter visited Malawi in early March, the need for food was extreme. A drought last year had decimated the staple corn crop, maize, and left farmers with little reserves.

Better rains this year mean the July harvest is likely to produce adequate food for the country. In the meantime, some families spoke of only eating once every two days. An

estimated five million of the 13 million people in Malawi need immediate food assistance.

To help explain the urgent poverty, Saanich brought in Khama Chibwana, a Malawian studying for his masters in child and youth care at the University of Victoria on a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship. His guest lectures to Saanich staff helped motivate an extraordinary response, said Nation.

One eight-year-old boy, a son of a municipal employee, brought in all the money he had - \$40 -- and gave it to the cause, said Nation.

Terry Rose, in the public works yard, sold hotdogs called "Zomba Dogs" every second week and raised \$650. Rose, along with fellow employees Bev Hamer and Ken Sternus, won a \$1,600 innovation award from the municipality for helping save money on water meters, and then donated the entire prize back to the Zomba Kidz Project, said Nation.

"It was really gratifying, and I think it has made the committee feel that there is a huge amount of support for this project," said Nation.

The Malawi project was designed to celebrate Saanich's centennial year by sharing Canadian wealth with a community in a developing country. Saanich was sister-city to Zomba from the 1980s to 2001.

While the official fundraising campaign has ended, Nation said Saanich will continue to accept donations and find uses for the money in Malawi. Donation information is available online at: www.gov.saanich.bc.ca/resident/centennial/zomba/project.html