

# Galt students gathering funds to go to Africa

By Gordon Lambie

Most people, when hearing the words “school trip,” will think of something like a bus ride to a museum, or an overnight stay in the national or provincial capital. In students the term is often synonymous with “time off,” because no matter what, the trip will mean hours spent outside of the classroom doing something out of the ordinary.

Alexander Galt Art Teacher Sigal Hirshfeld is looking to take that concept of “school trip” to a whole new level and give a group of local high school students an opportunity to change both their own lives and the lives of others by teaming up with the university-based Praxis Malawi Project.

“We wanted to have a humanitarian trip that wasn’t based around these huge companies that make money off of you volunteering in a foreign country,” the art teacher said. “We wanted to go with a project that is long term and will allow students to remain actively involved over the years.”

Hirshfeld explained that the group, which meets at lunchtimes outside of regular class hours, is planning around a two-year model. Since getting started in October, the students have been working on raising money this year to contribute to the development of a particular part of the project like a classroom or an orchard. Next year, they will work to gather the resources to take a team of ten to Malawi in 2017.

“So far it’s been very positive,” the teacher shared, saying that they are aiming to raise \$5,000 toward the work of Praxis Malawi and then about \$3,000 per student for the trip.

While establishing that the project is still very much in its infancy, Hirshfeld said that the group of students who have come out to participate in the initiative have been among the most engaged she has ever seen with any project over the course of her career. After a targeted appeal to students at the start of the school year, more than forty came out to the first meeting.

“It’s the most kinds I’ve ever seen come to one of these clubs,” the teacher said. “Usually I have five or six kids who consistently show up, but this has been a group of more than 25 kids now for the past month and a half, showing up every week.”

The difference, Hirshfeld theorized, is in the core of what the activity is all about. Where other student clubs link to students’ interests on a theoretical level,

this one opens the door to making a real concrete difference in the world in a way that most students don’t get exposed to in high school.

Not forced to do it, a choice. Interest seeded by we day after art auction last year

“They don’t have to wait to become adults, they can take action now within their own means,” Hirshfeld said, explaining that the seed of the idea was planted after a group of students held an art auction to benefit the Bishop’s/Champlain Refugee Student Sponsorship program last year. The action showed the young artists that they were just as capable of making a difference in the world as anyone else if they apply themselves, and that impression was solidified by a trip to “We Day” activities in Montreal. “The whole thing filled them up, they felt very inspired.”

“This is what education is supposed to be about,” said Melanie Bennett-Stonebanks, Praxis Malawi’s Education Coordinator. “It really is an investment in the future not just for Malawi but for the kids themselves.”

Bennett-Stonebanks stressed the education base for the entire Praxis Malawi program, whether for students at the university, cegep, or high school level. Unlike the increasingly popular “voluntourism” initiatives available to people these days, this project is focused on long-term connection and active focused research.

“It really is a research endeavor even for them at this young age. We are building future researchers,” said Bennett-Stonebanks, who also serves in the School of Education at Bishop’s University as Interim Director of Practice Teaching. “This is theory in action.”

Both Bennett-Stonebanks and Hirshfeld also spoke with great enthusiasm about the way they see the project offering an unparalleled opening to bring student learning opportunities and community-building together.

“It really is about community helping community,” the Education Coordinator added. “There’s one community here working with the community in Malawi and we want that to be as large as the community can be.”

Hirshfeld said that at the moment the group of roughly 25 students is focused almost entirely on coming up with and executing fundraising ideas both within the school communities that the project is working with and in the greater Sherbrooke area. On that note, she said that the group welcomes engagement and participation from the wider community either in terms of monetary donations,



Galt students are raising funds to help them get to Africa with the Praxis Malawi Project volunteer hours, or simply support and ideas.

“I’m letting them lead the way,” the art teacher said of her students. “If they don’t own it, it’s not going to stay with them.”

At the same time, Hirshfeld said that she is working on building strong bonds between the students involved, their parents, the community and the project coordinators. These links, combined with workshops meant to help inform the students about the realities of life in Malawi, will eventually help guide the teacher in choosing the core group of ten who will end up spending ten days in what Bennett-Stonebanks called, “the warm heart of Africa.”

“It’s open to everybody, but we’re going to do a selection process where student will have to show commitment,” Hir-

shfeld said. “There are kids involved who know for sure they’re not going; they just want to contribute.”

“Every drop in the bucket makes a difference,” Bennett-Stonebanks added. “There’s so much learning that’s involved; we’re learning constantly in every conversation that we have. The kids are going to teach us things along the way and we want the community to add to that knowledge base.”

Though right now the Galt group is composed of students ranging from levels two to five, Hirshfeld said that the plan is for the group travelling in the next school year to be made up of level three and four students.

“It’s never been done before at Galt,” the art teacher said. “It’s a big learning experience.”

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## RICHMOND

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In his text, Couture underlines the on-going need for libraries in small towns and villages and working at the library, which serves three municipalities, during the ten years he lived here, “I realized this library was unique with one third of its inventory loaded with English language books, the other two thirds in French. As a volunteer, I also recognized the commitment of the thirty or so volunteers who look after this book-filled space, where a reading corner invites members to stop, thumb through the pages of a book or two and make their final choice.

Couture also mentions the longstanding influence the library has on local youngsters especially with the 'Story Telling' scheduled one Friday a month.

The next 'Story Telling' event is scheduled for Friday, December 18, for children aged 3 to 7 years of age. This theme is 'Noel'. During the holidays, the library will be closed from December 20 to Wednesday, January 6 opening at 2 pm.