Constance Korosec has worked with many spools of thread over the years as professor and chair of the fashion, design, and merchandising department at Ursuline College in Pepper Pike. But never in her wildest dreams did she expect to one day become a thread of knowledge to help impoverished youngsters halfway around the world.

Last November Korosec was part of a team from Ursuline College that journeyed to the Republic of Malawi in southeast Africa for 11 days to teach school children how to sew. Bordered by Zambia, Tanzania, and Mozambique, the landlocked country is among the world’s least-developed nations, with low life expectancies, high infant mortality rates, and a prevalence of HIV and AIDS.

The 800-student school, Nanthomba Primary School, was built by the charity Hope, Educate, Love and Protect (HELP) Malawi and the people of Malawi. Founded by Jillian and Scott Wolstein of Chagrin Falls, the nonprofit organization provides services and programs in health and education to children of poverty-stricken African regions.

Although Ursuline College has a proud history of community service, it had never been faced with an opportunity like this one, Korosec says. The concept was the brainchild of Tiffany Mushrush Mentzer, Ursuline’s alumni relations director.
“She asked how I feel about taking my sewing skills and knowledge halfway around the world,” Korosec says. “She stopped me dead in my tracks. Usually I’m just asked to put on a fashion show for scholarship money in locations like downtown Cleveland or Akron. I was intrigued, and my first question was whether or not they have electricity.”

In fact, the school has a solar-powered system that provides a few hours of electricity a day, which was enough to ensure that the team could plug in sewing machines for a specified amount of time. Realizing the students had no supplies, Ursuline donated several sewing machines, thousands of yards of fabric, thread, buttons, snaps, rulers, scissors, and hand sharpeners.

In addition to Korosec and Mentzer, the group included Anne-Marie Gurko, a fashion design graduate student, and Jessica Lowe, HELP Malawi’s executive director.

And while many of the details remained to be determined regarding how the Ursuline team would best teach the children, one thing was certain from the beginning. The mission would provide the youth with a useful skill.

“It’s all about sustaining them in their short lives,” Korosec adds. “I took about two years of intense technical work that Ursuline’s students learn in four years, and crammed it into about 11 days.”

Upon arrival, one of the first things Korosec and her team did was set up workstations. They taught the students, who ranged in age from 6 to 14, various projects, starting with making small bags from fabric cut into rectangles. The volunteers had to conceptualize items on the spot that the students could make and sell to earn money for school supplies, and stressed the importance of creating products, such as totes, that were not frayed and would not fall apart.

The children were eager to learn and followed the visitors everywhere. Many were orphans who brought younger siblings with them to sit outside the school, as no one was available to supervise them. Despite their plight, they exuded an intrinsic happiness to be alive.

One of the many challenges was the language barrier, Korosec says. Although there was a translator and some students spoke English, communication was sometimes difficult. For instance, the children tended to operate the sewing machines too quickly and did not understand that they had to take their foot off the electrical pedal to slow down.

“Ther inclination was to pull back on the fabric,” she says. “So I removed the thread from the machines. For one hour I had them sew with no thread, just lined notebook paper, to see if they understood that the needle had to hit the line.”

The rugged landscape also presented challenges and opportunities for danger. Each day the group had to cross a river filled with crocodiles and hippopotamuses. Each night it dodged insects and slept in areas surrounded by wild animals.

Although Korosec was the teacher, she found herself learning from the experience.
When one of the machines stopped working, Korosec became resourceful. She opened it up, did some troubleshooting and fixed the problem. “It was the first time I ever did that,” she admits. “It taught me to improvise and believe that I can do anything. And besides, at that moment, who could I have called?”

The journey also taught her patience and to not take things for granted. “As Americans, we go at Mach 2 with our hair on fire,” she says. “There’s nothing wrong with taking your time and becoming more tolerant.”

Since her return, Korosec has spoken to her students on the importance of making a difference, and encourages them to take the Malawi journey. “It’s nice to know you’ve changed someone’s life,” she says. “I tell others to never miss a single opportunity to share their skills with the needy in developing countries, because each of us has much to give.”

For more information: helpchildren.org