HELP is nearby for Malawi contingent

By SALI McSHERRY

Improvisation became the key word as Ursuline College's Connie Korosec, in an extremely rural area of Malawi, Africa, repaired a sewing machine with no tools, and fixed a pair of flip-flops for a boy who had no other shoes.

Thousands of miles away from Pepper Pike, Dr. Korosec, who is director of the fashion department at Ursuline College, Tiffany Mushrush Mentzer, director of alumnae relations, and student Anne-Marie Gurko, taught adults and children how to sew at the Nanthomba Primary School.

The school was built by Hope, Education, Love and Protection Malawi, an organization founded by Jillian Wolstein, of Chagrin Falls. Jessica Lowe, of HELP, served as their guide.

Little did Ms. Mushrush Mentzer know that when she and Dr. Korosec sent a couple of "retired" sewing machines to the African community, it would be the precursor for a trip of a lifetime.

Ms. Mushrush Mentzer realized there was a great opportunity for partnering with HELP. She met Ms. Wolstein and the college's fashion department initially sent a crate of sewing machines that had been retired, along with fabric, notions like snaps, buttons and zippers and sewing magazines. Then, she got another idea. What's the use of a sewing machine if no one knows how to sew? It didn't take much to twist Dr. Korosec's arm and fashion design graduate student, Ms. Gurko to get on board.

Teaching the basic principals was the goal, starting with the organization of the sewing equipment, tools and fabric and notions, Dr. Korosec said.

None of the women in the class spoke English, but the language barrier did not hold anyone back. They crowded the tables to learn everything, Dr. Korosec said. When the students tried using the foot pedals to operate the machines, it was as if they were driving 100 miles an hour, she said. Those machines were smoking, she said with a chuckle. So the women learned to use the pedals with their hands so they would have more control over the speed, she said.

The women and kids were a teacher's dream, Dr. Korosec said. They wanted to know everything, she said.

"The teaching was very rewarding and though we were teaching them, they were at the same time teaching us. I learned not to take everything in life so for granted and to really be more thankful for things that we don't always realize are a luxury to us," Ms. Gurko said.

The lesson plans were tossed out the window. Hundreds of children wore clothes that needed major mending, some had dresses that were falling off, others had sleeves that had been ripped apart, one wore his only shirt tied with raffia, and another wore slacks that had no zipper or button, but were kept up with a belt.

The smiling children flanked the women as they sewed buttons, fixed zippers and mended rips and tears while the kids were still wearing the clothes.

The kids and women are so proud of themselves, mending each other's clothes, making fabric book bags, and learning a very useful skill, Ms. Lowe said. They learned to make items that are marketable, like jewelry pouches for the jewelry Malawi HELP sells.

HELP has partnered with Wilderness Safaris to build schools in rural areas that surround the country's national parks. Nanthomba Primary, is well equipped with classrooms and housing for teachers as well as a generator, fruit orchard, goats, chickens and crops that students plant and harvest. The school, which now has 900 students from nearby villages and children of park employees, is self-sufficient.

It's all about giving them the tools they need to sustain themselves, Ms. Lowe said.

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Ursuline College's Connie Korosec, Anne-Marie Gurko and Tiffany Mushrush Mentzer and members of the Nanthomba Primary School community showed off their book bags. They sewed them using fabric, elastic bands, buttons, thread and embroidery thread sent over by Ursuline College in Pepper Pike.

Felia, a student at Nanthomba Primary School in Malawi, smiled as she modeled her new hair accessories she and others made from the notions Ursuline College sent over.

Connie Korosec mended a child's clothes in Malawi, Africa, at the Nanthomba Primary School.