‘H.E.L.P.’-ing Malawi has become a family business
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Scott Wolstein and Jillian Wolstein

Scott Wolstein and Jillian Wolstein at the Malawi exhibit at Ursuline College.

Jillian Wolstein has proven that one woman can make a difference.

For the past six years, Wolstein, the former wife of Cleveland developer Scott Wolstein, has not just used the equity in her checkbook to assist residents of Malawi, Africa - she has used sweat equity.

Wolstein, her four children, and volunteers from the organization she helped found, H.E.L.P. (Hope, Educate, Love and Protect) Malawi, have spent months each year in the struggling African nation, the seventh poorest country in the world. They have worked side-by-side with the Malawians, helping build a school for homeless orphans and village children, establishing two medical facilities, and developing cottage industries that enable Malawians to become self-sufficient.

"Because of who I married, I was living a privileged life, as were my children, and I did not want to spend the rest of my life riding on my husband's coattails," said Wolstein, whom the Malawians call Chifundo (Mercy). "I wanted to pay back my own karmic debt. We all needed to earn the life we were living."

Wolstein and her volunteers have developed the nonprofit H.E.L.P. as an organization dedicated to sustainable primary education in impoverished African regions. The organization's mission asserts that it is every child's birthright to receive hope for a better future, education to grow, unconditional love, and protection from disease and illness.

In 2010, Ursuline College in Pepper Pike donated two sewing machines to H.E.L.P and sent a team of Ursuline students and staff to Malawi to teach sewing to the Malawian women and to assist with other H.E.L.P. projects.

An exhibit, "Journey of Education and Empowerment for Children of Malawi," at Ursuline's Wasmer Gallery highlights the contributions of Ursuline volunteers and features works by renowned Malawian artist Massa Lemu, a replica of a Malawian open marketplace, and a photographic exhibit showing the faces of Malawian children. It runs through Friday, March 30.

Wolstein initially selected Malawi, located between Tanzania and Mozambique in Northeast Africa, to begin her social service project because it was "a good fit," she said. "The troubles Malawians faced were not due to conflicts of man against man, nor was there corruption or tribal warfare - the people were extremely poor due to circumstances beyond their control," she said.

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After Wolstein made her first trip to Malawi, where English is one of two official languages, she knew she had picked the right country. "Malawi is known as the warm heart of Africa for a reason," she said. "The people welcomed me with full hearts; they were always joyful, generous and inclusive, despite their considerable hardships."

The first thing H.E.L.P. Malawi volunteers did was build a school with a library to replace a crude structure with a dirt floor. With the aid of Wolstein's personal funds and donations from friends and corporations, students were able to attend a fully functional school within three years of Wolstein's first trip to Malawi. Last year, 50 students from that school moved on to secondary school.

"We could not take them to one level and say to the students, 'You are now on your own,'" said Wolstein. "Since all their parents are sustenance farmers and could not afford secondary school tuition, we found H.E.L.P. sponsors for each of these kids, who paid their tuition."

A much-needed health clinic with maternity ward was the next project. Cleveland-based MedWish, a nonprofit that donates medical supplies to Third World countries, sent over $70,000 worth of medical supplies to get it going.

"Before we built the clinic, women were delivering their babies in cornfields, and kids were dying of treatable illnesses," said Wolstein. "There is no reason the Malawian women and children are not entitled to the same type of healthcare my children receive."

Wolstein has recently received support from her ex-husband Scott. "I had maxed out in what I know, and Scott is so brilliant, I realized H.E.L.P. Malawi needed his assistance," said Wolstein. "He came out last July and was blown away by what he saw. He now believes in our cause as much as our children do. In a roundabout way, H.E.L.P. Malawi is now a true family-run organization."

Wolstein's goal is to make Malawians so self-sufficient they can function independently. "In five to seven years, the businesses we help them create will generate enough income that they won't need outside funding and can go on without us," she said.

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WHAT: "A Journey of Education and Empowerment for the Children of Malawi"

WHERE: Ursuline College, Wasmer Gallery

WHEN: Through Friday, March 30

INFO: 440-646-8375