Help from Heart and Hands

Ursuline staff and students travel to Malawi

Ursuline instructor Dr. Connie Korosec with students in Malawi.

In 2006, Jillian Wolstein founded HELP, a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing Hope, Education, Love and Protection to children around the world. The foundation first established its programs in Malawi, a peaceful country known as the "warm heart of Africa," where despite a burgeoning tourist industry, the people of Malawi remain among the poorest in the world.

HELP strives to establish programs that are low-cost, culturally relevant to the participants and that will have a lasting effect on the people involved. "The most amazing thing about HELP is that in just 3 years, the organization … built a school, clinic with maternity ward, relationships with other nearby schools and is building a library," says Tiffany Mushrush Mentzer of Ursuline College. "I could not get over seeing it in person and seeing all that has been accomplished in that short amount of time. And you can tell how proud the Malawian people are of it."

Mushrush Mentzer established Ursuline College's relationship with HELP approximately a year ago, after receiving an email newsletter from the organization. "I thought what a great fit it would be for Ursuline to be a part of," she says. "When I first thought about the connection, I was just thinking locally and how we could help from here in Pepper Pike, Ohio. When I met with them, it became a much bigger picture for me and Ursuline. What could we do to actually help the people of Malawi?"

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Mushrush Mentzer consulted Dr. Connie Korosec, professor and chair of fashion design and merchandising at Ursuline, who had several ideas. It started with the donation of sewing machines, magazines and sewing supplies, which were shipped to Malawi. As the time came for the items to reach Malawi, the colleagues realized they needed to figure out how the school in Malawi was going to teach sewing. The result was that Mushrush Mentzer, Korosec and Ursuline graduate student Anne-Marie Gurko traveled to Malawi to teach sewing at the Nanthomba School. "It was really amazing to me how this small idea turned into an international idea." Mushrush Mentzer knew she and the rest of the group would change lives in Malawi, but their lives were soon to change as well.
The Ursuline contingent taught sewing to women, men, girls and boys, in order to provide them with a sustainable skill they can use in their own communities to earn money. "This project was a great way to show how fashion can help move different parts of the world to a better way of living," says Mushrush Mentzer. The students took to the lessons so well that the instructors had to rethink their week-long teaching plan on day one. "It was amazing to see all the students come together and work as a community to learn the techniques, and then teach each other."

A core value at Ursuline is collaboration, a concept brought to life through working with HELP and the people of Malawi. "We made contact with an organization with a little question of, 'How can we help?' - and it turned into something amazing," says Mushrush Mentzer, who believes it is vital for Ursuline students to have access to experiences like the Malawi trip. "We live in such a sheltered world, and to be able to see a community like the one in Malawi is very eye-opening. The experience can make you more aware of the world, as well as more open to the people around you."

The spirit of collaboration translated well to the people of Malawi. "On the final day, we took the class outside into the courtyard area and asked the head teacher, Christina, to bring students to us that needed mending on their clothing," Nearly every student needed mending done, and the sewing students stepped right in to use their new skills and show their classmates what they had learned. "It was very rewarding to see the happiness in their faces, but also see the joy in our students' faces," says Mushrush Mentzer. "They were so proud to be part of something so special."