

Fresh water, fresh hope

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By Andrew Cummins

In Malawi, drops of fresh drinking water bring tears of joy.

For the people of 78 villages in the southeastern African nation, Torrington's Trenda Weisshaar was able to help provide both.

As part of non-profit Marion Medical Mission's effort to provide fresh water to the country through the installation of shallow wells, Weisshaar returned to Torrington Oct. 12 after spending three-and-a-half weeks helping with the project.

Weisshaar was part of a team of 20 American volunteers from all across the country charged with installing pumps for wells that were dug and prepared by local villagers.

Each well costs about \$350 to build, she said, and are completely paid for by donations from people in the United States. With that money, Malawians are able to dig wells about 15 feet deep outside of their villages and prepare them for the installation of the pumps.

In total, two teams of 20 volunteers installed 843 pumps, which Weisshaar said equates to about 150,000 people being given access to potable water. "These wells are capped wells that provide fresh water," she said, noting that the wells drastically reduce the rates of infant mortality in the areas where they're installed.

Before the installation of the shallow and capped wells, villagers gathered water from non-enclosed, stagnant water sources that were often shared with animals, she said.

When the wells were completed, a dedication ceremony took place in which control was handed over to the village --- an occasion usually followed by a celebration.

"They were excited, they were ready to celebrate," she said, while adding they also unselfishly told the volunteers there were more people in the country that needed fresh water.

On her journey, Weisshaar was partnered up with a woman from Birmingham, Ala., and an interpreter. Together, the three traveled from village to village in a truck that carried their supplies, including large amounts of PVC pipe.

Because most people walk everywhere in Malawi, the volunteers did most of the driving as well, Weisshaar said. When driving, she said, ox-cart paths turned into walking trails, which then turned into no path at all as they moved farther away from the villages.

"We were just four-wheeling through the wild of Africa," she said.

Weisshaar's group traveled to villages all over the country, which led her to recognize that the terrain in the country is actually similar to Wyoming's, she said, noting that some areas were mountainous while others were barren and flat.

Heading into the experience, Weisshaar said she knew her purpose was to provide the country's people with fresh water, but added that she came away from her time in Malawi with a greater appreciation for life's blessings.

"I was enriched by people that have less than we do," Weisshaar said.

For Malawians, the basic needs of food, water and shelter are always on their minds, so they are content when they fulfill those needs, she said.

"It makes you realize how fortunate we (Americans) really are," Weisshaar said in reflecting on the experience.

The volunteers attended training sessions before their departure where they learned basic everyday language skills that they could utilize in Malawi, though Weisshaar said some of the younger children in the villages spoke English that they had learned in school.

"The more remote the village, the less English," she said of the language situation.

Despite the language and culture barriers she and other volunteers faced on the trip, Weissarr said she felt completely immersed among the local people during her time in Malawi.

"I didn't spend one day that I didn't feel welcome," she said, adding that she often ate meals with local residents in their homes and attended church services with them on Sundays.

That atmosphere allowed her to connect with people and form relationships, though with people she will likely never see again, that will remain in her memory forever, she said.

With all that she experienced and learned in Malawi, Weissarr said she is already planning to volunteer again and will also be presenting on the experience in the Torrington area in the near future.

Volunteers must pay for their own airfare and lodging costs, which added up to about \$4,000 for Weisshaar, but she ultimately described it as an experience where volunteers get as much out of their work as the people they are serving.

"It's a good way to do humanitarian relief at a basic level," she said.