

Africa beckons retired Tecumseh teacher

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The Windsor Star

Monday, October 27, 2008

Educator Janice Mayhew is clearly worried about the weight of the duffel bag full of school supplies she will be hauling with her to Africa next week.

Weighing in at 80 to 90 pounds, the hockey equipment bag -- chock full of pencils, erasers, flash cards, science kits and books, along with medical and hygienic supplies -- is now about 15 pounds over the limit for airline baggage. The recently retired Montessori teacher from Tecumseh, knows some of it might have to go, or be repacked.

But, when you know the supplies are destined for children who now likely don't even have a teacher or a classroom, let alone materials to work with, the question is: What can you really afford to leave behind? After shifting things around in a vain attempt to get under the limit, she sighs and concludes that she will just have to phone the airline to inquire how flexible it can be.

The 54-year old recipient of the American Montessori Society's prestigious International Ursula Thrush Peace Seed Grant feels excitement and trepidation about the one-month journey she begins Monday, to Tanzania, East Africa.

"I'm sure it will be life changing," she said. "Once I go, if it's rewarding, it could be something I would want to repeat. I may want to go back."

Mayhew, who founded Lakeview Montessori school and operated it for 30 years before retiring in June, said this will be her first visit to the Third World and she has heard the "horror stories" about what to expect. She has already learned that, after landing at Dar es Salaam she faces an "estimated" 10- to 12-hour bus ride, with several "restroom or bush stops" along the way, to the isolated community of Mbeya.

"I'm not looking forward to that," she said. "It will be a challenge. But, when we get there, I think it will be OK."

Upon arrival, she and colleague Laure Kominar -- co-winner of the international award and also an Ontario Montessori teacher -- will stay at the guest house of an orphanage, where many of the 60 children have been affected by the ravages of HIV/AIDS. She said she has been warned living conditions will be



CREDIT: Dan Janisse, The Windsor Star

Janice Mayhew packs a duffel bag full of items that she will give to children in Tanzania. The retired educator is going to the African country for a month to help set up a school.

relatively primitive, with an outdoor shower and laundry done by hand by local women.

After settling in, the Canadians will begin work on their project, a winning proposal approved by the Ontario based Olive Branch for Children, a charity that runs several projects in the area. They will meet with 28 people, a man and a woman selected from each of 14 neighbouring remote villages, and begin training them to be preschool and early primary school instructors.

"We'll train them as best as we can in the limited time we have," said Mayhew. "Then they will go back and start to teach, with an emphasis on language and numeration."

As of now, Mayhew said, she doesn't know what the qualifications will be of the men and women who have been selected to teach. But, she added, they will be outfitted with kits that include scissors, glue, rulers, pencils, sharpeners, erasers, counting sets, cut-out letters and numbers, flash cards and phonetic Montessori reading systems in English and Swahili. There will also be materials to begin the rudiments of science education

She said all instruction will be based on the Montessori philosophy, which emphasizes self-directed activity where children learn at their own pace, with an emphasis on respect for each child and for others, while nurturing the ideals of peace and understanding.

She said it's an approach that's badly needed in an area as underprivileged as the Mbeya region, where between 15 and 25 per cent of the population is infected with the HIV virus and where an increasing number of children become orphans, often with no means of support.

The Olive Branch charity also provides the children with medical care, nutritious food and sanitary living conditions.

"I've always been interested in doing some kind of a mission trip," said Mayhew, who has also received \$1,100 in donations and materials from supporters along with the the \$1,100, she received as part of the award. "But, because of time or whatever, it never worked out. I retired in June, now I have time."

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