

North Branford pair helps out in impoverished Ugandan village

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NORTH BRANFORD — They dug trenches in 95-degree weather, traveled for hours in a van with live chickens, and ate rice, chicken and fish for two weeks straight.

Residents Chris and Lisa Cozzi acknowledge that their recent service trip to a village in Soroti, Uganda, was tough at times. But they can't stop smiling when they talk about their favorite memories: photographing and providing pictures to schoolchildren who had never before seen their own faces in a mirror or photo; showing "The Lion King" on a projection screen to villagers; helping to bring enough food to feed a refugee camp.

They began the journey in October with four other state residents and the Rev. Richard Okiria of West Hartford, who started a nonprofit to benefit poor villages in his native Uganda, and say people should take advantage of opportunities to work in impoverished areas.

"I would encourage people if you have one opportunity in life, sooner than later, to go to one of these areas, not necessarily Uganda, but it could be Appalachia," Lisa Cozzi said. "You're going to grow so much, learn so much more, and have so much more respect for relationships with family and friends and your job."

This was Lisa Cozzi's second trip to Uganda and the first for Chris Cozzi, a member of the Board of Police Commissioners. Lisa Cozzi went two years ago on another trip organized by Okiria to install a well in a village, a project typically costing \$10,000.

"People still walk three to 12 miles each way to get clean water," Lisa Cozzi said. "You'll see 5-year-olds pushing bikes with water balanced on either side."

Okiria's nonprofit, Bridges to Hope, has been raising money since it was created about 10 years ago to fund farm improvements, install wells, and provide goats for milk and trading in villages in Uganda. Okiria, who started Bridges to Hope when he was working at two East Haven churches, said volunteers participating in service trips raise money at home to help fund projects.

Lisa Cozzi was eager to go back to Uganda, while her husband wasn't sure what to expect.

"I'd never been to a Third World country before. I was just excited to see what it's all about," Chris Cozzi said. "We had a lot of different things we were talking about doing and quickly learned to adapt because you can't really execute a perfect plan over there."

The Cozzis dug trenches with help from local prisoners to set up a crop irrigation system on a farm in Madera with a well one of Okiria's groups previously installed. The goal is to use the land as a model farm to teach locals about sustainable farming techniques.

They also brought food to a refugee camp that was more than two hours away from the village where they stayed.

"There were probably close to 1,000 people," Chris Cozzi said. "There was enough food for everyone in the village to have something to eat that day, which is not common."

When they visited a school of about 730 students in Agu, they saw students using chalk tablets sitting on rocks or the ground outside, as there were just four classrooms and no electricity. Knowing most of the youngsters had never seen their own reflection or had their picture taken, the Cozzis brought a digital camera, computer, printer, paper and ink.

"They don't know what they look like unless they catch their reflection in a puddle," Lisa Cozzi said. "So we took school photos, class photos, individual photos. ... The best part of the trip was seeing them see themselves."

And kids and adults alike enjoyed a nighttime showing of "The Lion King," even though it was without sound.

"It was quite a thing to see those kids and the joy because they never get to see these things, and we do this (in America) every month," Okiria said.

Okiria, the Cozzis and others involved in Bridges to Hope are also hoping to raise money for \$500 scholarships to send children in Uganda to high school. Okiria said village girls need the most help, because they usually have more opportunities to get married than go to school.

Donations to Bridges to Hope can go specifically to scholarships or other projects of a donor choice

and can be sent to 17 Boxford St., East Haven 06512. For more information, visit Lisa Cozzi's website at beanangelforhope.com, as the Bridges to Hope website is being updated.