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Sylvia's Children trip to Africa a learning experience for group

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 07/12/07

BY SAMETTA M. THOMPSON
STAFF WRITER

HOLMDEL — When Sylvia B. Allen talks about her experience on the trip she recently made to Africa to help children in need, tears roll down her face.

"It's not crying sadness," the 70-year-old Holmdel resident said. "It's overwhelming."

Allen, and 13 others, including her daughter and son, Michele Costa, 36, and Antony Costa, 33, returned last month from a 10-day trip to Masaka, Uganda. The group went to provide aid to about 800 youngsters at the Mbirizi Primary School.

Allen is founder of Sylvia's Children, a 3-year-old nonprofit organization based in Holmdel, that provides help to African children whose parents have died of AIDS.

"My whole plan was to get my (own) children to realize what I was trying to do," Allen said. "My kids thought I was crazy until we got over there and then they were just awed by the beauty of the children and the absolute unbelievable loving. We would walk around and have 20 to 30 children hanging on to you — full of love and you see the happy faces."

What touched Allen's heart most was when they were greeted by the schoolchildren who sang a song they had written especially for them.

"They had a big sign that said 'Welcome Grand Sylvia,' " said Allen, who is adoptive grandmother to 750 African children and students.

Everyone who traveled to Africa with Allen had a role to play with the schoolchildren, she said. The group engaged the students in various recreational and sporting activities and even sat in on classes.

"The children are amazing as far as their knowledge," Allen said. "I was excited to see the kids excited about learning."

Since Sylvia's Children was founded in 2004, the organization has raised more than \$100,000 to help the children with food, clothing, school fees and other supplies, she said. "I think the kids were thrilled to have us there because they got to do a lot of fun stuff out of school," Allen said. On this trip, Allen said, she even gave the school \$3,000 to buy two acres of land so they can expand the school.

Allen returned home with 3,000 handmade decorated quilt squares the African children made. She said she will find creative uses for the quilts and send the profit back to the school.

Michele Costa of Freehold said she was glad she took the trip with her mother.

She said the trip, her first to Africa, "was amazing. I think I learned more from them than I taught them."

"The simple things that you do for them really matters," Costa said. "It's the simple things that we as Americans take for granted."



(FILE PHOTO)

Sylvia B. Allen is the founder of a nonprofit group dedicated to helping African children in need.

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"It was really, really nice to bring recreation into their life. It was so cool to see their faces, seeing all the new experiences with the kids and watching it through their eyes." Eager to go back and offer a helping hand, Allen has already started making plans for next year's trip that will be from July 5 to 15. Costa said she can't wait to go back again.

Allen's future plans for the students includes helping to build a library, buying playground equipment, laptop computers, new latrines, school supplies, building a health clinic and a host of other necessities.

"One person can make a difference," Allen said.

For more information about next year's trip to Masaka, Uganda, with Allen's organization, call (732) 946-2711. The organization is at 89 Middletown Road, Holmdel.

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