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LIFESTYLES

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Ted Grant, left, of Cornwall, president of the P.E.I.-based Mikinduri Children of Hope Foundation, and Ray Loxdale of St. Catherines, director of A Better World, a humanitarian organization that also works in Africa, recently visited Mikinduri, Kenya, to see how foundation projects are progressing. (GUARDIAN PHOTO BY MARY MACKAY)

Hope for the future

Three years bring big changes for the Kenyan village of Mikinduri, thanks to a helping hand from the P.E.I.-based Mikinduri Children of Hope Foundation.

**By Mary MacKay
The Guardian**

It's a changing landscape in the village of Mikinduri, Kenya.

In the past three years, a maternity ward has been completed — all that's needed now is equipment and supplies.

A feeding centre has also been streamlined to serve the needs of hundreds of children and women who have been orphaned and widowed by AIDS.

And just this week, ground was broken for the construction of a children's shelter that will eventually be a welcome and permanent home for 100 children.

Above all, something else is new in Mikinduri.

"There's a difference in the hope of the people," says Ted Grant, president of the Prince Edward Island-based Mikinduri Children of Hope Foundation that has helped the people of Mikinduri with the aforementioned projects.

Since the foundation was initiated in 2003 by Makena Ambassa, who was born near Mikinduri and now lives in Mermaid, P.E.I., it has helped to fund the feeding centre, worked toward establishing the children's shelter and maternity ward and provided clean water to the people of Mikinduri.

Grant recently returned to Mikinduri for a second visit. This time he was accompanied by Ray Loxdale, director of A Better World, an organization that has been working in Africa for 15 years. Their projects include a new school in Masia Mara and a flour mill in Lamu.

A Better World is working in partnership with the Mikinduri Children of Hope Foundation to coach and guide them on a project to bring water to Mikinduri.

Because Loxdale is familiar with international development work, he provided the Mikinduri Children of Hope Foundation with an assessment of its projects in the area to date.

"I was pretty impressed actually. The people of Mikinduri were very friendly. They're wanting to help themselves and that's the key part," Loxdale says.

"There's no sense of any group going in there and telling the Kenyans what we want them to do. They should come to us with proposals and tell us, 'This is what we think we need in our village' and we can help fine tune that and that's what's happening in Mikinduri."

The Children of Hope Foundation has set up a community development council of local people in Mikinduri which has separate divisions to deal with the feeding centre and children's shelter, as well as the wellness centre, which is the maternity ward and clinic and water issues.

Initially, the foundation was aiming to bring the water down from the mountains and filter it, but thanks to this fact-finding mission, Grant is optimistic that some dug wells, as they are called, can be excavated to access fresh water sooner.

"We figure if we can at least get some people water in strategic areas throughout that drought-stricken area then we can make a difference immediately for these people and still work toward the pipeline," Loxdale adds.

"We were told there were some areas there that hadn't had any rain for over a year. and we saw stunted corn in the fields and dry (landscape)."

At the Wellness Centre compound, which had an existing clinic, the villagers have started building kitchen and laundry facilities for the maternity ward. When Grant first went to Mikinduri two years ago, the maternity ward was just a concrete shell.

"It was an empty cement stone building. Since I went there last time, the development that has taken place is that there is now fresh, clean water in the maternity ward. The inside of the maternity ward is completely finished, ready for furniture, equipment and supplies."

The foundation is now focusing on the second phase, which is to equip the maternity ward project.

The feeding centre, run by a local pastor and a local committee, was in place when Grant first visited.

Funds donated by Islanders on a monthly basis through the Children of Hope Foundation, along with help from local churches in Mikinduri and donations from local farmers in the area, has provided a steady flow of food for orphans and widows.

"The fact that we've started to steadily send them a decent supply of money, they were able to operate on a consistent basis. In other words, they had consistent food then so that people knew if they came on a certain day they'd be fed, whereas before they might have food today or they might not have food today," Grant says.

"In addition to that, at the feeding centre they now have AIDS screening capabilities. They have retroviral drugs for the children who are tested positive. They have fresh water in the feeding centre and they are feeding more kids."

The number of orphans has risen from 330 when Grant was in Mikinduri two years ago to more than 700 registered orphans now in a town of only 4,000 people.

At present, the foundation has five engineers from McGill University who are in Mikinduri breaking ground for the new children's shelter that is so desperately needed. By this summer, construction will be complete and there will be a new home for 100 children.

Ambassa says the arrival of the five volunteer engineers and Grant's and Loxdale's recent visit buoyed the spirits of her family, friends and neighbours in her hometown of Mikinduri.

"They were very excited and very hopeful, of course, because they know they didn't just go and forget about them. They knew if (Grant) was coming back then even better things would begin to happen," she says.

The children's shelter will also become the new feeding centre to replace the present rented sight. It is located on five acres of fertile ground so the crops will be planted and farm animals will be raised for food for the feeding centre and the orphanage. It also has access to fresh, clean water.

"They can grow crops, they can have cows, sheep, goats, they can have hens, all of that. So the money we currently send for food can (eventually) go on to other things like perhaps a training program for the older kids . . . ," Grant says. "So it's an evolving thing."

The Mikinduri Foundation is also working on developing a relationship with UPEI on international development projects and is in the process of studying the possibilities of making applications to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for funding. The foundation hopes to someday be able to tap into the 2:1 funding ratio provided by CIDA.

Fortunately because of the attention from Canada that Mikinduri has garnered of late, for the first time in 25 years the government has directed funds toward the area for improvements, including completing the first and most expensive mile of the 10-mile pipeline for the irrigation project to bring water from the mountains to the village.

In the meantime, the foundation is providing the people of Mikinduri with \$15,000 to dig eight to 10 wells.

Although Ambassa is a world away from Mikinduri, she is still in close contact with the people who live there who are moving toward a better future with a helping hand from the Mikinduri Children of Hope Foundation.

"They're very, very hopeful. Every time I get an e-mail from the pastor he says, 'You have no idea the changes all this has brought to the people here. They are very hopeful. The children, it's all they ever talk about,' " she says.

"I'm so grateful that (the foundation) happened here (on P.E.I.) because I don't know if it would have worked if I were anywhere else."