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Take me to the river Will Rogers Middle School pupils make a symbolic trek to learn empathy for poor children from an Ethiopian village

By Lakiesha McGhee -- Bee Staff Writer
Published 2:15 am PDT Sunday, June 5, 2005

Each day, the children of the Ethiopian village of Kersa Ilala must walk a total of four miles to fetch water from the nearest river for drinking, cooking and bathing.



Will Rogers Middle School students, from left, Marina Kopytsya, 12, Olga Samarkina, 12, Jie Wang, 13, Dumitru Apostu, 14, and Roman Schmigelskiy, 14, carry water from the American River back to Fair Oaks Village in a trek representing children in Ethiopia who must walk four miles a day to fetch water from a river near their home.

• [See additional images](#)

Sacramento Bee/Florence Low

The water isn't clean, and people who drink it often become sick from parasites and other dangers hidden in its murkiness.

Makeshift homes in the small village in the Rift Valley region of East Africa don't have running water or a well for clean water. There is no electricity, and access to clothing, clean bed sheets and other basic necessities is limited.

Students of Will Rogers Middle School in Fair Oaks are learning about these challenges.

Sweep tackles blight

Sacramento Coun enforcement office two-day sweep la of Orangevale's ol commercial distric their efforts to cui the area.

Final bell at R

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Last-minute c dad from liver

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Police/fire log

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Last week, they took a symbolic journey to the American River to gather water and to illustrate what children in Ethiopia do every day. They walked from Fair Oaks Village to the river's Upper Sunrise Recreation Area and back, a total of about two miles.

The activity was part of the school's "Village for Village Project: Let Us Tell Your Story." International students enrolled in the English Language Learners program at Will Rogers have participated in the yearlong service learning project, which aims to connect students to the children of Kersa Ilala.

The village was unofficially adopted in 1999 as the "Village of Hope," part of a humanitarian program founded by a Utah couple.

"It's really sad hearing about what they go through," eighth-grader Amber Thurman said as she trekked Tuesday along a trail on the American River Parkway. "We're trying to put ourselves in their position to see what it would be like to have to get drinking water from a river."

School officials said their goal is two-fold: to build student character and concern for the people of Ethiopia and to help improve an impoverished country.

"We want the kids to understand how well we have it here in the United States and how fortunate we are to have clean drinking water," said Eric French, vice principal of Will Rogers, which has more than 250 international students representing 30 nations on campus.

After about 30 minutes, the students arrived at their destination carrying the flags of the United States, Ethiopia and the Olympics. They gathered under a tree for a lesson to help mirror the learning atmosphere of students in Kersa Ilala.

Teachers and students used oversized illustrations to help tell a story about Kersa Ilala called "The Village That Remembered." It will be shared with students in Ethiopia as part of an English lesson, they said.

Will Rogers students also listened to guest speakers Norm and Helen Klein of Rancho Cordova, who will go to Kersa Ilala in July to coordinate the first "Village of Hope Run" for 2,000 students of Kersa Ilala Village School.

Helen Klein, 82, was a 2002 Olympic torchbearer in Sacramento. She holds numerous world and American running records and has completed 71 marathons and 141 ultramarathons.

Norm Klein is a retired oral maxillofacial surgeon and a race event director who coaches track with his wife at John Barrett Middle School in Carmichael. He

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Homes are lik drive-in site

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Relay for Life

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Sacramento Coun Roberta MacGlash meeting of the Cit Community Cabin a presentation by Scott, general ma chief executive of Sacramento Regic

Sidelights

A group of youth athletes from the Taekwondo Cente Heights earned gc bronze medals in competitions.

His chalk talk ladies' attentio

Finding direction i Gray's often strea consciousness pre speeches isn't alw the Sacramento S players, but they it out well enough opponents feeling

helped prepare students mentally for their water-laden walk to Fair Oaks Village.

"An Ethiopian child will carry 17 to 25 pounds of water up a hill, so you can certainly carry one bottle up a hill," he said.

"Village for Village Project: Let Us Tell Your Story" also involved students assembling 300 educational kits and other items for students in Kersa Ilala, project coordinator and teacher Naomi Harper said.

Many of the donated items were created by students and included hand-made "T-shirt dresses," science workbooks, puppets, banners, hygiene kits, written field experiences and a painted mural of the Kleins and Ethiopian Olympic gold medalist Haile Gebrselassie, Harper said.

Will Rogers students and teachers also will provide a collection of photographs, exhibits, music, brochures and video presentations of students' work to show their support for Kersa Ilala and share the story of the village with other area schools.

Harper will present the project to the Kersa Ilala Village School during a two-week "Village of Hope" humanitarian expedition in July.

Harper said it will be her third trip to Kersa Ilala with "Village of Hope."

"After my second visit, I wanted to do more and bring attention to the need for clean well water for the villagers of Kersa Ilala," Harper said.

Harper wrote a grant proposal on behalf of Will Rogers Middle School to the Christensen Fund, a private foundation dedicated to assisting organizations in the visual arts, education and conservation science with a focus on four regions of the world, including the Rift Valley in Ethiopia. The Christensen Fund granted \$26,000 in November to fund the "Village for Village Project" at Will Rogers, Harper said.

Harper will be joined by 50 people going to Kersa Ilala on July 23. The group includes the Kleins, two other teachers from Will Rogers and several Sacramento-area residents.

Volunteer Geri Beck of Fair Oaks said they will conduct a health fair and set up teaching stations in the village, which also is set to get a new well in July. The \$250,000 well project was funded by the humanitarian department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Beck said.

"Every year, several of (the villagers) die due to the poor quality of their water," Beck said. "The new well is going to make all the difference."

Yelena Stipak, 12, originally from Ukraine, was among the students last week at the American River. She said the school project taught her how hard it was for people in Ethiopia.

"I hope the children in Ethiopia have more fun," Yelena said.

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Will Rogers Middle School pupils dip containers in the American River before making the trek back to Fair Oaks.

Sacramento Bee/Florence Low



Children in Kersa Ilala, a small village in Ethiopia, face challenges, including fetching river water.

Special to The Bee/Geri Beck



Children in Kersa Ilala, a village in Ethiopia, must walk four miles to fetch water from a nearby river.

Special to The Bee/Geri Beck

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