WTB Monthly Meeting Minutes – Sunday, January 15, 2017 at Jowonio School

Due to some problems getting into the building, the meeting began late. Everyone pitched in with good spirits to set up the room and refreshments. Chairs were arranged in a horseshoe around a viewing screen and a Habitat for Humanity display table.

About 3:30 President Betty Lamb was able to call the meeting to order. She began by thanking everyone for their help and patience, sharing that Betsy Wiggins and Barb Bova had to miss today’s meeting as each was at the hospital with her husband. The group sent prayers and healing thoughts for Jim Wiggins and Barb’s husband. As part of our Lifecycles series, today’s topic focuses on adolescence, specifically the impact housing, family, and education can have on children as they mature into adults. We were fortunate to have women from Habitat for Humanity and Starfish International here to explain their missions.

Betty introduced Suzanne Williams, Executive Director of Syracuse Habitat for Humanity for 17 years. Drawing on past experience in insurance, real estate and debt collection, she oversees onsite development, home building, and the mortgage process, working closely with partner families from beginning the application process to the end result of home ownership. She has guided construction/rehab of over 75 homes in our area, and also oversees Restore (which resells donated home items at low prices). As a mother, grandmother and great grandmother herself, Suzanne knows that a stable home can make a vital difference in a young person’s life. Marianne Bazydlo, an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) focusing on Resource Development at Syracuse Habitat, was also present.

Suzanne spoke of the incredible positive impact getting a house can have on the children of partner families. She told a story of a young boy who inexplicably cried when he was shown where his bedroom in his new home would be—inexplicably until she learned he cried because he couldn’t face changing locations yet again. Children in families without stable places to live also absorb the insecurity and stress of their parents/caregivers. Often people in marginal housing live in unsafe/uncomfortable situations. For example, one family lived with an unrepaired broken windows rather than ask their landlord to repair them and risk eviction. Homes in bad condition can consume over 30% of a family’s budget for heat and lights, leaving little money for nourishing food. Some marginal homeowners take out second mortgages to repair leaking roofs or broken steps only to lose their jobs, default on payments, and have the bank foreclose. Habitat for Humanity now helps arrange for second mortgages to prevent this from happening; interest rates to partner families are 0%. Suzanne shared truly inspiring stories of volunteer efforts to provide functional, safe, secure homes so families can get a fresh start. Among their projects are Interfaith Houses, built by volunteers of different faiths working together. Habitat can have a huge impact on the quality of life for children and their partner families and by extension the larger community. Overall, after moving into their Habitat houses, kids’ grades, study habits, and school attendance significantly improved; parents report that children with respiratory ailments are healthier because they no longer live in moldy, dusty substandard housing. A national survey of Habitat owners found that 74% felt their family’s health had improved. Habitat often continues working with these families resulting in economic and social benefits to the greater community as well as each family. Suzanne brought some handouts and a large poster board displaying pictures of some of their houses.

Betty then introduced Madeline Kujabi and Fran Greenman both speaking about Starfish International. Madeline is an 18 year old Gambian lady finishing high school at Bishop Grimes. A Starfish girl in The Gambia for 8 years, in 8th grade she was given the opportunity to finish her studies in the U.S. Currently living with her host family and guardians Fran and Joe Greenman of Manlius, Madeline recently received her first college acceptance. Fran Greenman, raised in NYC, graduated from SU College of Nursing and Upstate Nurse Practitioner Program. Although she served in many professional capacities, she has worked extensively with children and adolescents in hospital, outpatient and educational settings, including 23 years as a school nurse in the F-M district. She and her husband Joe, a law partner and Manlius Town Justice, were introduced to Starfish International by Donna Richards 7 years ago. In February 2016 they finally traveled to The Gambia; their daughter is the current Volunteer Coordinator for Starfish.

Madeline charmed us with the story of her journey and pictures of Starfish in The Gambia. She traveled back to The Gambia in the summer of her 9th grade year and retains close friendships there. Madeline’s PowerPoint highlighted the Starfish mission: “to empower Gambian girls by providing them with an education that focuses on service to humanity.” (Starfish website) Girls have an opportunity to learn English and academic skills, but also build confidence and competence in other areas learning first aid, small business skills, martial arts, and photography. The program focuses on setting and achieving personal goals and service to humanity. Starfish stresses five values: nobility, independence, courtesy, knowledge and service. Volunteers from America and other nations come to support the Gambian girls in their learning, forging understanding and friendship across cultures. Madeline’s accomplishments and self-confidence spoke volumes about the impact Starfish is having on these girls and their futures.

Starfish International was co-founded by Mam-Yassin Sarr and her husband David Fox. Its international headquarters is in Bridgeport, NY. Yassin was active in WTB before she returned to The Gambia to found Starfish in 2006. Yassin’s sister, Nyima, spoke about the origins of Starfish. Yassin’s mother was able to continue her studies beyond high school, however as a girl only two choices of career were open to her—teacher or nurse. Yassin vowed to change this by educating as many Gambian girls as she could to help them realize their potential and break the cycle. After graduating from college in the U.S., Yassin returned to her village in Gambia to fulfill her dream with her family’s full support. Yassin began by asking the principal of her high school alma mater to give her one hundred girls at risk of dropping out for financial reasons; she would pay for their education through donations. From that beginning Starfish has grown to an organization with a 98% graduation rate that has expanded horizons for many Gambian girls.

Fran then spoke about her family’s involvement in Starfish and her trip there in February 2016. We were unable to see pictures of her trip due to technical difficulties, but Fran described the experiences she and her husband shared on their visit, and her admiration for the work Starfish is doing to educate and inspire excellence in Gambian girls. Fran talked about the beautiful fabrics and dresses that Gambian women make and wear. She brought bright, colorful, lined bags handmade by the business manager of Starfish, which were available for sale.

Adolescence is a time of change and growth when young people are impacted by the circumstances they live in and the choices they see for their futures. Organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and Starfish International can have a positive impact on young people as they forge their paths into adulthood.

Respectfully submitted,

Barb Bova, Sunday Secretary