

Tools, the sequel

By Penny Caster - Red Deer Advocate - July 09, 2008



When it comes to lending a helping hand to schools and educators in Northern Ghana, once is not enough.

And you can't have too many hands, either.

This summer, when friends Marilyn Pottage and Marilyn Ganger return to Ghana from their Red Deer homes with the sequel to their Tools for Schools Project, they'll have more help.

Fellow retired Red Deer teacher Jean Mudd will be coming along, as will married teachers Cathy and Doug Sather, who are still working with the Red Deer Public School system.

The five will be providing workshops for Ghanaian teachers, many of whom have had no formal teacher training.

It's a need the two Marilyns discovered last year when they arrived to distribute two massive shipping containers full of books and school resources they had collected in Canada and shipped to Ghana.



Jean Mudd, left, Marilyn Pottage and Cathy and Doug Sather are heading to Ghana on a Tools For Schools project. Missing in the photo is Marilyn Ganger.

Once they realized what was required, they set to work and pulled together a couple of one-day teacher-training sessions.

The first drew 146 teachers and the second, 160. It was held at a different location.

There was no cost to participants.

This time around, there will be five three-day sessions, all likely will be held at the same location — a girls' boarding school at Damongo, the centre of the region.

The school has good facilities and is ideal for the effort, says Pottage.

Since it's a boarding school and it's during the holidays, the attending teachers can stay there.

There are likely going to be a lot of them — about 160 for each of the five sessions.

Initially, Pottage and Ganger began efforts to raise money to buy 500 teacher-training manuals, geared for teachers in the West African country, but they have, in fact, ordered 1,200.

"So each teacher will go home with a manual on how to teach English and a science manual and a math manual," says Pottage.

Other resources, geared to Ghanaians and Ghanaian children, will also be provided.

It's a big effort for the teachers who will be attending the training sessions. Some are coming from as far away as 120 km, says Pottage, and it's not as if there is any sort of regularly scheduled public transportation.

They will have to hitch rides on trucks, with others, and in general, make their way to Damongo by any means they can.

Sometimes the best they can do is crawl on top of whatever load a truck may be hauling and cling on.

The people Tools for Schools are working with in Ghana are equal partners, says Pottage.

They are providing the meeting space, and are responsible for inviting teachers to the workshops.

One of the sessions will be aimed at head teachers, or principals.

But Tools for Schools is going beyond teacher-training sessions and providing resources.

It has become a registered society and has developed a long-term plan.

"We want to get more girls from the northern region able to pass the entrance examination to go to high school."

In particular, the group is looking at St. Anne's, a high school for girls originally built by Germans. It has very high standards and is an excellent school, says Pottage.

The push to educate girls makes a lot of sense, she says. "At the majority of schools, there are far more boys than girls."

That's because the girls are most often kept home to help with the chores.

Pottage says the literacy rate for girls is about five per cent, versus 25 to 30 per cent for boys.

On top of that, an educated girl is far more likely to return to her home village and share her knowledge.

Pottage referred to a Time Magazine article that quoted a study that found that there is a better economy, better health care and more democracy in societies where women are educated.

Tools for Schools hopes to establish scholarships for deserving girls in Ghana, to enable them to get an education.

A parallel project by Tools for Schools involves helping some of the young women in the area they are visiting to sew saleable items for the tourist trade.

Another one is the provision of solar cookers.

They provide a healthier and safer environment and would relieve some of the girls of their firewood-collecting responsibilities, therefore perhaps making time to study.

Tools for Schools is now looking ahead several years, and plans to continue bringing its work to the attention of area service clubs and other organizations and the public at large as it seeks to fulfil its goals.

For more information on Tools for Schools, or to find out how to donate, please check www.tfs-africa.org.

Once the group is settled and the work underway in Ghana, a blog will be maintained on the site, too, for those who would like to follow the progress.

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