

The power of the pencil to educate

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The problem may be big, but so is the effort to help.

The Oakville chapter of Pencils for Kids is gearing up for a new campaign aimed at raising funds needed to help bring the tools of education to the children of Niger.

There is no shortage of need within the African nation, which is considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world and is ranked nearly last on the United Nations Development Fund Index of human development.

With little government funding coming their way, this means that in some Nigerien schools 30 children share a single pencil.

This sad fact is something Vivian Leung, 17, the organizer of the Oakville Pencils for Kids campaign, is trying to change.

"There is a huge population of children and youth in Niger and we really want to be able to empower them and give them the tools and skills to support themselves and become successful," she said. "Education is so important."

Leung, a student of Abbey Park High School, noted her group will be accepting donations and will also be selling special pencil necklaces, made by Nigerien artisans, with 97 per cent of the proceeds going toward the educational needs of Nigerien children in the community of Libore.

The remaining three per cent is needed to cover the national organization's administrative costs.

The money raised will help fund the building of schools and libraries, sewing programs and scholarships for girls, the professional development of teachers, reading clubs, school supplies and more.

Unfortunately none of these projects is cheap.

"It costs \$30 to sponsor one student for an entire year with textbooks," said Leung.

"That's actually incredible when you consider the cost of textbooks here."

So far the Oakville chapter of Pencils for Kids, which consists of approximately 20 students from eight Oakville schools, has succeeded in raising approximately \$1,000, but is hoping for much more.

In addition to raising money, the Oakville group succeeded in getting about 100 Oakville elementary school students to write brightly-decorated letters to the children of Niger, who will then have the opportunity to



The power of the pencil to educate. PENCILS 4 KIDS: The Oakville Chapter of Pencils for Kids is launching a campaign aimed at raising funds so children in Niger can go to school. Pictured are (clockwise starting with the girl holding the Pencils for Kids sign) Rebecca Kurtz, Ayzhan Alimukhambetova, Sammi Phung, Stanley Phung and Vivian Leung holding letters they will be sending to Niger.
NIKKI WESLEY / OAKVILLE BEAVER

respond.

The founder of the national Pencils for Kids program will be travelling to Niger at the end of January and will deliver these letters while there.

"Through these letters, we're hoping to bring a bit of Oakville to Niger and to bring a bit of Niger back," said Leung.

"I think through these letters, especially for the younger grades, hopefully connections will develop and the kids will understand there are people in other parts of the world who don't have the things they have. We want to try and build bonds like that."

The Oakville campaign to help the children of Niger gain access to education is not the first fundraising effort Leung has engineered, organizing a campaign to help the victims of the Sichuan, China earthquake in 2008 and a campaign to aid the education of Afghan women in 2009.

"I really believe that being in Canada and living in Oakville with a family and shelter and all these great and amazing things, I'm really fortunate for that," said Leung. "A lot of people in other countries and Third World countries don't have these resources or these opportunities. I think it is important that I at least try to make some impact and help them get the resources they need to achieve their goals. Everyone has dreams."

For more information, visit www.pencilsforkids.com or call 905-764-7997 or e-mail info@pencilsforkids.com .

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