

*The University of Western Ontario*

# Western

*spring 07*

**ALUMNI GAZETTE**

## The faces of hope



**SPECIAL ISSUE:**  
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makes a difference  
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# Improving yourself by helping others

Students of Martin Herbst, BEd'01, travel and learn in Kenya

By David Scott



This is an elementary classroom with students from the Mara Region of Kenya. It is an old classroom with dirt floors and walls of mud/dung/sticks with a single window with no glass. Martin Herbst's students worked on construction of a new school to replace classrooms like this. (Photo by Martin Herbst)

How do you measure success? In material wealth? Does owning a big screen TV mean you're worthy?

Inner city students discovered that it's more than possessions that determine a person's worth.

Teacher Martin Herbst, BEd'01, led a group of 13 high school students from Monarch Park Collegiate in Toronto to Kenya to build a new school in November 2006.

The road to get there involved getting approval from the largest school board in Canada and resulted in a one of a kind program being created as a blueprint for future learning trips for Ontario high school students. As well, it was a life-changing experience for the students involved.

Three years ago Cheryl Perera, a speaker from "Free The Children," an organization spawned by Canadian youth Craig Kielburger who had a vision of children helping children through education and by building schools in developing countries, came to visit Monarch Park. Free The Children has been nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize and has partnerships with the United Nations and Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network.

The entire school body heard about child youth workers in India and Pakistan and the sex slave trade and how in developing countries these stories didn't make the media. "That kind of outraged a lot of kids. We decided at that point to do a coin drive for a 'Brick

by Brick' campaign," said Herbst, to build a school in a developing country. He worked with fellow teacher Bryan Gurney, who was instrumental in bringing Free The Children to Monarch Park and starting the coin drive.

Each Thursday volunteers went around to students to pick up donations of loose change. By the end of the first year students actually raised \$6,200.

The goal was to build a school with the money. Then something happened that changed their plans. On December 26, 2004, the tsunami in Southeast Asia struck.

"The school really rallied behind that. And in two weeks we raised \$5,000 for medical supplies and the United Way." All told, Monarch Park Collegiate purchased \$32,000 worth of medical supplies for victims of the tsunami.

Fundraising to build a new school in Kenya through Save the Children began the following year.

Principal Rob MacKinnon came up with the idea of actually physically building the school that Herbst and others were fundraising for. MacKinnon sought approval from the Toronto District School Board, got the nod from Superintendent Jill Worthy and Director of Education Gerry Connelly and traveled to Kenya to see the facilities available firsthand. When he returned he approached Herbst and said, "okay Martin, this is what we're thinking of doing. We would like you to write the curriculum for this little experiment."

The Faculty of Education graduate wrote an interdisciplinary Grade 12 study course that was an amalgamation of peer mentoring and leadership; economics; information technology and computers; cultural studies; physical; social studies; and religious studies.

"We wrote it specifically for Kenya – but not specifically about Kenya so it



Taking a brief break from the task of digging are, from left: Martin Herbst (Teacher), students S. Baziuk, L. Fraser, Tara Green (Martin's fiancé - Volunteer Supervisor), students S. Hakim, A. Cristiano, J. Doucette, J. Presutti, A. Fisher, A. Fischer, B. Carter, K. Dembowski. Standing in back row: Students F. Ha, N. Hagos, J. Huffman.

can be duplicated across the province.”

His colleague Mike Mead wrote the curriculum for a course which studied the history, politics, geography and the ecosystems. Herbst believes this is the first time in Ontario that a very involved four-credit travel and learning program like this has occurred.

After the course template was created Herbst was responsible for students getting their passports and immunizations. Aside from the obvious travel preparations, another level of fundraising would have to happen to raise the \$5,000 cost per student to participate.

“Monarch Park is a very inner-city school. The students that go there aren't necessarily from families where mom or dad can write a cheque for you. That was challenging to meet that goal but before we were ready to fly, all the kids were able to get it (enough money).”

For many of the 13 students it was their first time on an airplane. For almost all of them it was the first time off the continent. One student had never left the city.

When they arrived in Kenya, they were transported to a protected compound in the Maasai Mara area where the school was located. About 400 students attend the elementary school. Each grade occupies a separate building. The building being replaced was built in 1969 and had outer walls made of wood panels. The inside dividing walls were made of sticks, mud and dung. There were no glass windows, just open wood-shuttered windows. The classroom had a dirt floor with wooden tables.

“If it was in Canada, you wouldn't put your dog in it. And here they have 91 kids in it,” said Herbst.

The students were there to build a brick and mortar school – bricks were actually stones that had been hand-carved. There were no power tools on-site. No electricity. No cement mixers or dump-trucks. All cement came in bags and was made by hand in wheelbarrows with shovels.

“Here we were on the side of a mountain the first day and they handed us a bunch of pickaxes and said okay folks you need to dig down five feet to build the foundation. The reaction was: ‘We're here to do what?’ We knew we were there to build a school but didn't fully comprehend what that actually meant.”

The students really began to see the world through different eyes, said their teacher. “They saw kids who were malnourished, with jaundiced coloured eyes, with open sores, with no shoes on. They saw 13 people live in a hut that is basically the size of their bedroom.”

Their perspectives changed during the trip. As inner-city kids they carried a negative self-image often propagated by the media. “We live in a ghetto,” or “I don't have the big screen TV they have on Laguna Beach...so therefore I'm not worthy,” said Herbst.

Once the students arrived in Kenya and saw how things were, they began to see that, “I can make a difference. I can have an impact. And here I am thinking that I'm poor,” said Herbst. “Not realizing there are 900,000 people living basically in a slum in Nairobi. People might be

happy but they have no access to clean water, no access to health care systems.”

The experience made an impact on the students, who ranged in age from 16 to 21.

“In Canada, we live in a society where people are constantly worrying about material happiness. The people I met while I was in Kenya taught me there is a lot more to life than having material possessions.”

*Ashlynn Fisher*

“The community welcomed us with open arms and I have never felt so welcomed in my life. We were there to accomplish our goal, and that was to build a school for the kids so they can have a better education. Anyone can make a difference, even if it's just helping one person.”

*Skye Baziuk*

“The real kicker was seeing how their government failed to provide a sustainable community for their people in the rural parts of Kenya, unsafe schools, no healthcare or clean water, no employment opportunities and how those people were still happy, they still made the best out of each day and they still worked together to make a better community for themselves.”

*Bryanna Carter*

Herbst's fiancé joined him on the trip.

When she walked into one of the classrooms in Kenya, she noticed that it was the same lesson on their

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# Bristow retires after far exceeding his goal

By Karmen Dowling, BA'96

After almost 20 years as Foundation Western's Executive Director, James C. Bristow (BA'61, HBA'63), is retiring with plans to spend more free time on the golf greens.

When Bristow joined Foundation Western in October 1987, it had been in operation for eight years with total assets of \$5.3 million, supported by alumni fundraising of \$2 million annually.

At that time, Foundation Western employed five staff while the



Jim Bristow earns a well deserved break in retirement.

Development (fundraising) team had just four members. Today, the Foundation employs seven individuals who work in tandem with an Alumni Relations and Development team of more than 50.

Bristow's original goal was to increase the endowment from \$5 million to \$25 million - that target was surpassed long ago. The Renaissance Campaign and the more recent Campaign Western added more than \$70 million in new endowed funds and at December 31, 2006 (Bristow's last day at the helm) Foundation Western's endowment exceeded \$130 million.

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blackboard that she was just teaching in Canada.

"It's amazing what they can do with the little amount of resources available to them. They are being taught calculus. They are being taught algebra and geometry. They are being taught English language as well as Swahili and a number of other courses that puts them on par with Canadian students," said Herbst.

Not only did the perspectives of the students change but their teacher's as well.

"The one thing that really got me was the day we were at the build site and the recess bell went off. Everyone is getting really tired. It is physically demanding moving 80 wheelbarrows of sand and concrete to make a concrete pad. That day when the kids all poured out of the schools, they grabbed the wheelbarrows and shovels out of our hands and kept saying something in Swahili. I had no idea what this is. I went to our trip facilitator and she said the direct translation is: 'Together we are building our school.'"

Herbst said the community was involved from day one. They provided security on the site to make sure no one stole the building materials. Women in the community brought in water daily two kilometres by donkey's back or their own back that was needed to make the concrete and the mortar. Running water does not exist in the community. A water collection process happens at the new schools once they're finished. They put eavestroughs on the buildings that flow into a water collection tank.

"This is important because it allows the young girls to come to school. Because most of the time, girls in the community are required to fetch water. By putting a water program at the school, it allows the girls to attend."

Herbst and his students were fortunate enough to be accompanied by independent film producer Steve Miller during their trip which allowed them to film a documentary.

"He works with Free the Children right now. He went with us and we used his cameras. The kids shot in digital.

In recognition of his achievements, the Foundation Western Board of Directors has created a student entrance scholarship in Bristow's name. The value will be \$1,500 with the first award being given in September 2007.

Foundation Western is Western's alumni endowment fund and is an incorporated charitable public foundation. It is governed by a 12-person Board of Directors, all of whom are Western alumni.

Frank Pyka, former Director of Finance at the London Community Foundation, took over for Bristow on January 1, 2007. ☺

It was edited when we returned and we now have a 22-minute short film documentary that will be submitted to international film festivals."

Right now Herbst is in the planning stages for another trip in the fall of this year to Kenya. He sees this interactive method of teaching as an evolution of the profession.

"The more we can engage our students the better they become as citizens and global citizens. We've seen at Monarch Park an incredible transformation among the student population. Not just the 13 kids that went but the rest of the school has really begun. They're much more engaged in what they're learning. And can see much more relevance in what they're doing.

"I believe we have the power to make the world a better place for everyone." ☺

## Nahome Hagos

For more information on Free The Children, visit:  
[www.freethechildren.com](http://www.freethechildren.com)