

He makes the music happen



Greg Rogers, left, helps teens do volunteer work in Africa and India.

Top secondary teacher Greg Rogers leads students overseas

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Greg Rogers would rather stay out of the spotlight.

The Toronto Catholic school board teacher is the driving force behind an ambitious program that sends local teenagers to India and Africa to build schools, teach and volunteer, as well as numerous other programs aimed at fostering student leadership. But he wouldn't mind if the credit went to someone else.

Perhaps, instead, we could recognize the many people who helped him along the way, he says. Or his heroes and role models, such as Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities for people with developmental disabilities, or Free the Children co-founder Marc Kielburger, who was one of his students.

Colleague Kevin Welbes Godin, the school board's consultant in religion and family life, uses an apt poetic analogy to describe this 55-year-old father of seven.

"When you see orchestras being conducted, it's almost like the conductor isn't there," he says. "The music happens."

It certainly does, which is why Rogers has been selected as this year's winner of the OTIP Teaching Award in the Secondary category.

When Rogers was in his early 20s, he was on track to work in management for Bell Canada. He had never taught before but, on a bit of a whim, he ended up at a school in Mansa, Zambia teaching "English, geography, whatever they needed at the time."

"While I was teaching in Africa, I fell in love with Africa and I also fell in love with teaching," Rogers says.

He returned to Canada two years later, went to teacher's college and starting teaching, first at Chinguacousy Secondary School in Brampton, then at his alma mater, Brebeuf College School in Toronto, where he was head of the social sciences department and then acting vice-principal.

When he was seconded to the school board in the '90s, he took the opportunity to follow a dream.

One day he walked into his superintendent's office and said, in his gentle, unassuming way, "Mike, I want to take students to Calcutta. Or to Africa, to Zambia."

He remembers the superintendent's response: "Greg, we can't even take kids to the museum. You want to go to Calcutta?"

But he and a fellow teacher, Robert Lato, convinced the school board to let them take 21 students to India in 1996, where they worked with Mother Teresa. "That experience was so powerful," Rogers says.

He has since developed an overseas leadership program that focuses on four pillars: service, learning, leadership and adventure.

Since 2004, Rogers has run a program in Kenya every summer, working closely with Free the Children and his former student, Marc Kielburger.

The students help build schools and run camps for local children, using their basic Swahili to teach drama, art and phys-ed.

Running the Kenya trips is only part of Rogers' role as co-ordinator of student leadership for the school board. He also continues to run excursions to India.

In Toronto, he takes police officers and at-risk youth on canoe trips, organizes a day of service where students volunteer throughout the city and facilitates a host of other projects, including conferences and retreats. In the summer, he is the associate director of Olympia Sports Camp.

'I found my heaven'

Toronto students' lives were transformed while volunteering in Kenya

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TORONTO STAR

Carolynn Mazzei may be back home in Ontario, but her heart remains 12,000 kilometres away in the Maasai Mara area of Kenya.

"I found my heaven," says the first-year student at the University of Western Ontario in London. Mazzei, 17, spent three weeks in August volunteering in Kenya through a youth leadership program offered in partnership with the Toronto Catholic District School Board and Free the Children's Me to We.

From Aug. 2 to 24, Mazzei was among 19 students and six adults who toiled away with hand tools to create the foundation for a new medical clinic, ran camps for Kenyan schoolchildren and helped local women on "water walks" to fill buckets at a river.

"The relationships I built with the children and the kindness of the people was just amazing," says Mazzei, whose only previous foreign travel experience had been a vacation to Florida. "One day, I was on a water walk and all the mommas and children were in line waiting to fill their buckets. One of the mommas took my bucket and filled it up and handed it to me and said, 'This is my gift to you.'"

She is still moved by the gesture, as water is a precious commodity in drought-stricken Kenya. She also thinks constantly about the children she met in the orphanage and intends to return to volunteer again. "I know my purpose in life now."

Greg Rogers, co-ordinator of student leadership for the Toronto Catholic District School Board, has seen many young participants experience life-changing moments on the Kenyan trips. Free the Children co-founder Marc Kielburger had been one of Rogers' students and a member of the school rugby team he coached. They reconnected in 2004 when Rogers was organizing a student trip to Tanzania.

"That was our first project together and we've had a partnership ever since. This was our fifth trip in six years," says Rogers. "It's been a wonderful partnership. One of the greatest highs for a teacher is seeing a former student be successful. I feel honoured to be working with Craig and Marc."

The program has four pillars: service, leadership, learning and adventure.

"There are many ways to see Africa but the primary reason in this program is to give service to help make the world a better place," explains Rogers. "And with the leadership aspect, the kids influence others in their group and the Kenyans. The trip has five different legs and, for each leg, a team of four or five is in charge, for things such as boiling water, doing the wake-up calls, seeing that everyone takes their anti-malaria pill."

The learning component begins in October when the group starts meeting on Sundays once a month, says Rogers. "They create the curriculum and take ownership of their learning, which usually involves knowing about the language, the culture, health and safety. And on the trip, they are responsible for keeping a journal."

Then there's the adventure portion, which will include a safari to see a diverse array of wildlife, including lions, zebras, wildebeest, water buffalo, rhinos and gazelles.

"We make no bones about it – it's going to be a great adventure, but in a safe context," says Rogers.

The trip participants live in a *MASH*-like compound of army tents, portable washrooms and showers of water dumped from buckets. They eat nutritious, locally grown food. Bottled water is supplied.

"They work three or four hours a day on construction and there's no backhoe pulling up there," says Rogers. "It's all with axes and shovels. In May, we take them on a weekend retreat to a farm to learn how to use tools and work three or four hours a day to get a sense for what they'll be doing. We usually work to build a school, but this time it was a medical clinic."

The teens run camps in the school, covering subjects such as drama, math, science, phys-edu and music.

"We have a big Olympic day, when kids come from other schools to be part of it," says Rogers, who still coaches sports. "We have eight different stations, from ball hockey to soccer, and it's all in the context of fun. We have different teams with their own flags, cheers and songs and we have a Kenya/Canada soccer or volleyball match."

The students spend a lot of time interacting with the locals and, from the "mommas" (female elders), learn how to do beading, prepare traditional foods and make rope from sisal plants.

"Many of them come back and say 'I didn't realize how good I had it in Canada,'" says Rogers.

Anujan Mahenderan, 17, who attends Neil McNeil Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, agrees.

"It opens your eyes. When we handed out pens, the kids went crazy, like we'd handed them a cheque for a million dollars," he recalls. "I realized, 'Wow, we take things for granted in Canada.'"

Mahenderan joined the program for two reasons: he'd been elected vice-president of his school council and wanted to demonstrate that young people can make a difference, and he wanted a sense of the lifestyle his parents had while growing up in Sri Lanka.

"It was amazing and I'd suggest any parent send their child on this program as soon as possible. It helps you mature. The people are so welcoming and loving and appreciate you for who you are. It was an experience you can't define."

On a personal level, Mahenderan says, "it helped me focus, to see if you put your mind to it, you can accomplish your goals."

Thomas Hunt, who attends Alexander Mackenzie High School in Richmond Hill, got the bug to visit Kenya after his grandparents travelled there. "I definitely changed a great deal by going there. I look at everything as a resource now, after seeing the women have to walk three to four kilometres to get water and that it's so scarce. I realized how lucky we are in Canada."

Hunt says the group was moved by the poverty they saw and by visits to the orphanage, where a staff of five cares for 70 children.

"You look at the people's living conditions and despite that, they always have a smile on their face," Hunt says. "It truly felt like home."

Hannah Boyd, 17, who attends Havergal College in Toronto, had been "so excited waiting for my turn" to participate in the program, as her aunts and sister had done. One aunt is on the board of Free the Children and her sister still volunteers for the organization.

"It was so important for me to be able to share their experience and it was amazing," Boyd says. "I was on a water walk with a Grade 7 girl one day and she took me off the path, through a cactus fence to her home. Her momma gave me a big hug and I felt like I could have spent hours there. Even though there was a language barrier, we were totally communicating."

She's determined to return to Kenya. "I really hope to go back in 2011 when the medical clinic is finished."