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Teachers from The Colony pursue mentoring mission in Rwanda, Uganda

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By WENDY HUNDLEY / The Dallas Morning News

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Tammy Whitaker is a busy wife, mother and seventh-grade math teacher at Griffin Middle School in The Colony.

But part of her heart is in a remote section of Africa where war and poverty have taken their toll but not destroyed the people's desire for a better life through education.

"I can't save the world. But I can help one teacher," said Whitaker, who has launched a fledgling project linking North Texas teachers with their counterparts in Rwanda and Uganda.

The goal of America to Africa – Teacher to Teacher is to provide mentors for the African teachers who want to learn more effective teaching methods.

"Teachers here and all over the globe have the same desires and goals for their students," said Karen Hendrix, another Griffin teacher who accompanied Whitaker to Africa this summer. "We want them to be successful."

On their trip, the teachers took about 100 pounds of school supplies collected by Griffin students in May. Now, some Griffin students have begun corresponding with pen pals on the other side of the globe.

For Whitaker, the mentoring project is personal. She began going to Africa four years ago on summer mission trips with her church, Bent Tree Bible Fellowship in Carrollton.

The church was providing support to widows of Rwandan pastors who had been killed during the genocide of 1994. An estimated 1 million people were murdered when Rwandan Hutus tried to rid the county of the minority Tutsis.

The turmoil has continued in neighboring Uganda, where a rebel army has abducted countless children over the years and turned them into child soldiers. To avoid being abducted at night, Whitaker says, rural youngsters will travel into the cities to sleep in hospitals or other safe places.

The legacy of these atrocities still lingers, said Whitaker, who has made four mission trips to Africa. As a teacher, she was naturally drawn to the schools, where she noticed that most of teaching is conducted through lectures.

"I had visited schools, and I knew there was a need for teacher training," Whitaker said. "The majority of the teachers' training is in content. They're never been taught how to teach, how to reach the kids."

That was the start of her idea to provide one-on-one mentors. When in Africa this summer, Whitaker and Hendrix spent a couple of weeks visiting schools and talking to teachers to learn more about their needs.

"They're out there in the country without any support," Whitaker said. "The resources are not there and we have so much."

About 30 teachers from four schools in Rwanda and Uganda have expressed a desire to be a part of the program. When paired with a Texas teacher, they will communicate through e-mail, using computers at Internet cafes that are common in African cities.

So far, word of Whitaker's initiative has begun to spread throughout the Lewisville school district, and about a half a dozen teachers have signed on.

Whitaker hopes more teachers will get involved in this simple way to share their knowledge and experience.

"We don't have to give money," Whitaker said. "We can share what we've learned."

HOW TO HELP

Teachers interested in learning more about the "America to Africa – Teacher to Teacher" project can e-mail Whitaker at a2at2t@gmail.com.