

Beyond the GTA



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Left to right, Royal St. George's College math teacher Alex Shum, and Grade 11 students Mike Sherman, Thomas Pepper, Jordan Hyde, Eddie Beqaj and Matthew Muncaster show the school flag they raised on Mount Kilimanjaro during a three-week school trip.

Journey teaches lessons not found in any book

Toronto students climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, then helped build school in Kenya

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STAFF REPORTER

Their destination was East Africa and their mission was one of help and hope.

What five Grade 11 students from Royal St. George's College and their teacher brought home from their extraordinary March Break trip was a new view of the world and themselves.

And the lessons they learned — while ascending the world's highest freestanding mountain and travelling across Nairobi and into Kenya to help build a school — can't be found between the covers of a book.

The three-week journey of self-discovery, part of the downtown Toronto school's global outreach, began in Tanzania with a gruelling test of endurance. For Thomas Pepper, reaching Kilimanjaro's Gilman's Point at 5,681 metres after five days of trekking — the last at night on treacherous, icy scree trails — was an unforgettable adventure. Though the trekkers were all desperately fighting to breathe and physically spent, Pepper had high hopes of reaching the summit Uhuru at 5,895 metres.

Not achieving the ultimate goal didn't distract him from the breathtaking view. In his mind's eye, he can still see the magnificent landscape of Kenya and the Serengeti as he watched the sun rise from Gilman.

No amount of training could have prepared the crew, all 16 years old, for Kili's power, according to Matthew Muncaster. During the last hours of the ascent — in the dark — all he could focus on was putting one foot in front of the other. The physical and mental exhaustion was overwhelming.

Ahat presented to the group by an RSGC student who's battled poor health motivated math teacher Alex Shum not to give up.

"I just wanted to get a picture with the hat at the summit," he said. Their guide ended the climb at Gilman due to dangerous conditions. "We reached our personal summits and no one gave up easily," said Shum, an avid rock climber.

At Gilman's, the team and Shum with hat on head proudly

'We did something that actually helps a community that needs help'

Mike Sherman, Royal St. George's College student

flew the RSGC school flag.

One of the most rewarding experiences for the team was in the Kipsigis region of Kenya, where they worked in the blazing sun for eight days setting the foundation for a nursery classroom at the Motony Primary school, said Jordan Hyde. The sight of 500 children singing as they ran to greet them that first day is one of his most cherished memories.

"It was hard to leave such warm, friendly and welcoming people who are so happy and cherish everything they have," he said.

The experience also made him understand that one person can make a difference. By working together and raising even a small amount of money "it can buy so much for Africa and change lives," providing precious treasures like education and clean water, he said.

The school is being built by Free the Children — a youth-driven Toronto-based NGO founded by international child rights activist Craig Kielburger. The RSGC students raised \$94,000 for the charity before embarking on their journey. To help raise awareness about the challenges facing Africa, the school organized a speakers' series that included Stephen Lewis, retired general Romeo Dallaire and Dr. James Orbinski former head of Medecins Sans Frontieres International.

Work on the Motony classroom began in earnest on the second day in the village. Armed with pickaxes, shovels and wheelbarrows, the RSGC team dug a trench through mud and rock for the foundation, said Eddie Beqaj. Like his buddies, he held up his hands to reveal hard-earned callouses and blisters. Under the watchful eyes of local experts, they mixed cement by hand for the foundation's concrete base and mortared layers of quarried stone. Students from schools in Vancouver, Boston and Halifax also helped with building.

When the RSGC crew wasn't working on the school, they went into the community to get to know the people and see how they lived, worked and played. They also visited another school under construction in the Maa-

sai Mara village of Ngrone Ngrone.

Looking back, Mike Sherman has a real sense of accomplishment.

"What we did in Africa was the most pure form of community service," he said. "We did something that actually helps a community that needs help."

And the children he met, two brothers in particular, have left a lasting impression. "I am connected to them."

The African children may have only known a little English, but their gleaming faces and bright smiles broke down all language barriers, added Beqaj.

"Coming home was very hard," he said, adding he now understands that "what the people have is what they love and they don't want to change that."

The trip has given the students a different perspective on the world. It's also given new meaning to community service, said Pepper. "I feel that the school is ours," he said adding the group became friends with the people they helped. More important, he recognizes that though they have little, they cherish it and in many ways, "you understand they are better people than you are."

For Shum, it's been an incredible journey.

"I thought we would transform lives, but the people transformed me — transformed all of us.

"I think it's safe to say that we all have begun to question the progress that is attributed to modern life in the West."

Connect to the RSGC website www.rsgc.on.ca and click on "Help RSGC Students Build a School in East Africa" for the trip photo gallery and blog.