

Aptos couple works for change in Tanzanian homeland

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Forty-seven years after leaving his Northern Tanzanian village to seek an education, Aptos resident John Shoka and his life partner Mary Braham have launched a bold effort to improve living conditions in his impoverished homeland.

For the couple, both recently retired college professors, Kishapu is a place calling for change. They envision basic amenities for the community -- accessible water sources, health services to stem the barrage of disease and economic support for the largely agrarian community.



"Our mission is to increase the quality of life and well-being of the community of Kishapu and other rural areas of Tanzania," their Web site states.

This summer, the couple spent six weeks in the region of Kishapu, a 32-hour plane route and several hours of driving from their quiet condominium in Aptos. They landed at the Shinyanga regional airport in Tanzania, a dirt landing strip amid miles of dusty roads and scattered villages, and they got to work.

In addition to visiting family members who have all moved away from the village to bigger cities, the couple delivered 100 insecticide-treated mosquito nets to the local health center that will help combat malaria. They met with geologists to discuss ways to improve water sources. They also registered their new nonprofit agency -- the Kishapu Community Development Center -- as a non-governmental organization, which gives them the ability to operate in the country more freely.

In addition to the couple, the all-volunteer board of directors of the KCDC includes Shoka's son, Max Shoka of Pleasant Hill, David Thiermann of Santa Cruz, a career

consultant and Franklin Marshall, founder and director of the Children's Learning Museum in Santa Cruz.

"We're taking it one step at a time," said Braham, who taught nursing at Sacramento State University for years and is very interested in health issues in the region, "... one well at a time."

The Kishapu region is home to about 16,000 people living in small villages. People have to walk miles to a nearby clean water supply. They struggle to survive a plethora of preventative diseases and barely sustain themselves by living off the land using archaic farming methods.

Shoka left Tanzania in 1961 to attend college in the U.S. He had planned to return home after school to serve as chief like his father and grandfather but, just months after his departure, the country won independence and the tribal chief governing system ended.

"Plans change," Shoka said. "Things turned out differently."

Shoka got a job teaching government at CSU Sacramento and eventually married, had a son and made his home in Sacramento for 35 years. He was divorced many years ago, and has been with Braham for 25 years. They retired to their summer Aptos home a few years ago.

Last year, Shoka and Braham's brother-in-law, Dan Will, met with elders in Kishapu to discuss community needs and goals. The eldest remembered when Shoka's father was a tribal chief. They said they'd wondered what had become of the Shoka.

Together, they identified three priorities: economic viability, water resources and health care that focuses on disease prevention. Malaria and HIV are enormous challenges in the region. The community promised land for a community center that will serve as a central education facility.

This summer, Shoka and Braham met with other NGOs in the region that they hope to partner with to improve the water supply and farming methods. They identified 15 young people they can sponsor next year to take seminars in nearby communities and bring them back to the community.

In their Aptos living room decorated with African art, the couple unfurls blue prints for the community center that were drawn up by a Tanzanian architect. The center will be built in stages as funds are available.

"We didn't want to build in one of the more developed nearby towns," Shoka said. "Because of the rural dirt roads, a city just 32 miles away can take 90 minutes to reach by car. We wanted this operation to be built and influenced and used by the people in the village."

Shoka and Braham say they need \$3,000-\$5,000 to build a well for a village of about 500 people and the region needs more than 30 wells.

"This is a big dream and we know we have to do it stage by stage," Shoka said.

The nonprofit has raised about \$3,750 toward this year's modest goal of \$5,000 and hopes to raise twice that next year. They plan to dig the first wells next year. The couple is covering the startup and administrative costs so all donations can be used for direct services in Kishapu. The organization is in need of expertise in Web site design, fundraising, grant writing and marketing expertise.

"I left over 40 years ago and now I show up so people are curious and asked, 'Why are you coming?'" Shoka said. "They said, 'I thought you had forgotten us, that you were an American.' I said I went to school. This is home. I still think of you."

"We really feel happy that you still think of us," they said.

For information or to donate visit www.Kishapu.org, or write to: Kishapu Community Development Center, 2617 Willowbrook Lane, #86, Aptos, CA 95003.

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