



“To those whom much is given, much is expected.”

John F. Kennedy

by Karen Burbach

UNMC ALUM FINDS LIFE'S WORK IN AFRICAN VILLAGE



Michelle Kowalczyk, '04 (left in ballcap) and Kim Krowne, with children at Matumaini: (bottom row from left) Jackson, Scola, and Ericki; and (top row) Roger and (in doorway) Sharifa.

Three years ago, Michelle Kowalczyk fulfilled a childhood dream to go to Africa.

Little did she know she would find her life's passion among the bright, toothy smiles of the children in the tiny village of Rau, at the southern base of Mount Kilimanjaro.

“It's a magical place,” Kowalczyk said. “The people live on so little yet live such a rich life.”

Even so, life is not easy in the East African nation where poverty, AIDS and malnutrition are as common as the dirt paths, banana groves and Swahili welcomes.

But, Kowalczyk, a 2004 College of Nursing alum who will earn her master's degree in nursing in May, is committed to the people and their future.

In 2008, she and Kim Krowne created the Knock Foundation, a non-profit organization to support impoverished communities in the developing world. Krowne, a Northridge, Calif., native, met Kowalczyk while volunteering at a Tanzanian mother-baby clinic in 2007.

The foundation's name exemplifies the women's desire to open doors through opportunity and community empowerment.

Opportunity first knocked on the Matumaini Child Care Center, a small, three-room house in Rau where 20 children,



Kowalczyk, along with the facilitator, teach family planning to a group of women during the Knock Foundation's annual HIV/AIDS Healthy Living seminar.

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Michelle Kowalczyk



While shucking beans, Kowalczyk, left, along with an intern and Sheila Ryan, Ph.D., far right, director of international nursing education programs at the UNMC College of Nursing, discuss the possibility of obtaining a planter that would help increase the yield.

predominately AIDS orphans, live. Then the Knock Foundation initiated self-sustainable development projects with village women, built chicken coops and pig huts and conducted life skills sessions, as well as bought textbooks and lunches for students at the Mrupanga Primary School.

In February 2009, Knock purchased an acre of land near Matumaini (pronounced Mah-too-my-e-knee) to build a new child care center to house 40 children. Construction is expected soon on the \$200,000 project that will include dormitories for boys and girls, a

dining hall and classrooms.

“Some people search their entire life for a purpose,” Kowalczyk said. “I’ve found it at such a young age and am trying to do all I can.”

Upon graduating as an acute care nurse practitioner, Kowalczyk will spend five months in Tanzania and then return to the States to work and pay off school loans with a dream of one day moving to Tanzania.

Until then, she’ll raise funds to help the Knock Foundation sustain existing projects, which includes a \$20,000 plus operating budget for Matumaini. She’d also like to establish business sponsors, as well as life sponsors for the children.

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Kowalczyk, who turns 29 in April, struggles when she returns to the states. “It’s a culture shock to come back to America and see how money is easily spent and know what it could do in Africa.”

“We’re lucky in America that we’ve been given the opportunity to help people,” she said, urging others to volunteer in their communities or abroad. “You give a little and you get it back 10 times. It enriches your life.”

“Not only is Michelle doing great things for the children of the Matumaini orphanage, but she is raising the health of the whole community,” said Sheila Ryan, Ph.D., professor and director of international programs for nursing who visited the Tanzanian village of Rau and witnessed the foundation’s work. “It’s a fabulous experience for our students to learn from – not just what they do differently in the clinic and hospitals, but how you approach helping to lift a developing country out of their own poverty. Michelle is doing that.”

Matumaini means ‘hope’ in Swahili and Kowalczyk and the Knock Foundation team see that every day in the faces of Stefani, Sharifa, Alexi, Jackson, Monika and the others at the center.

“They’re definitely not orphans in Africa to me,” Kowalczyk said. “I can tell you their dreams and what their faces look like when they’re in a bad mood or excited...They’re my kids.”



Visit the Knock Foundation at www.knockfoundation.org or the Matumaini Child Care Center at matumainichildcare.org



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