

Fulfer:

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not just teaching.”

During the second week of his trip, though, his trajectory changed.

More to be done

“The first time I noticed one of my students were gone, it was one of my chess players. I talked to the director, (and) ended up finding he literally couldn’t go to school, couldn’t afford (it),” Fulfer said. “His family is starving, his parents are dead, he was literally trying to take care of his family, and come by any means necessary to provide food.”

Fulfer, wanting to get this student back in the classroom, purchased a week’s worth of food for the student and his family, which was six people in all.

The total cost?

Four dollars.

“It got a massive bag of vegetables, it got me fruit, it got me (ugali) powder, got me rice, spaghetti, (and cooking) oil,” he said of the purchase.

The Tanzanian shilling is not even pennies to the dollar in comparison to the greenback. In fact, he said, the exchange rate is about 2,300 shillings to one U.S. dollar.

With a supply of food in hand, the student was back in the classroom the next day.

The experience did two things for Fulfer. One, it forced him to completely rethink his approach when it came to food and money.

“That has changed my mentality of everything,” he said. “Now, going to the store (or buying) anything, I have to think. I think so many times about what I’m buying, what I’m purchasing — is this needed? What can I do with this money?”

But he also started notic-



Olan Fulfer stands with a group of students outside of Arusha, Tanzania, who just received new uniforms — students he also helped teach chess to.

ing more kids missing, and knew there was more to be done.

Much, much more.

“One of the kids passed away (of) HIV; passed away (of) starvation,” he said. “It terrified me. I was like, ‘Where are these students?’ The director was like a student can pass away, and there is nothing we can do. That terrified me to where I’m like, ‘We have to do more.’”

Stepping up

What downtime Fulfer had was gone after that, as he devoted hours not in the classroom to getting as many students and other Arusha-area residents as possible as much help as he could.

For some, it was uniforms for school. For others, it was clothing and shoes.



Olan Fulfer, center, demonstrates chess to a group of students at a combined school and orphanage outside of Arusha, Tanzania.

For several, it was food. For still others, it was rent payments to prevent eviction. Illness is often one of the challenges that keeps people from being able to work.

For some, it was all of this.

“This is a 97-year-old that’s blind that fought World War II for the British,” he said, showing a picture of the man. “That was a British colony at the time. We ended up paying for rent, medicine, blankets and an entire bag of food to help out a little bit.”

Fulfer quickly learned, too, the etiquette of properly helping.

“You can’t just go there and hand out food, and be like, ‘Here’s a blanket, here’s shoes, here’s all this kind of stuff.’ I think it’s considered disrespectful to say, ‘You get this, you get this,’ (You become) the white savior. And I learned a lot. I want to do the most impact that is going to be the most respectful.”

“What we ended up doing was meeting with neighborhood leaders who have the best intentions, to where they pinpointed (the) families that were in the most need, and what they do. They won’t just accept it, they want to tell you why they are accepting it.”

Fulfer also worked with Hope and Soul, a charity working in the region that is

focused on sustainability.

“She (Hope and Soul Founder Hope Prosser) warned me that what we’re going to be doing is very, very difficult. And I thought I was prepared,” he said. “I’m like, ‘I did it, fed this family, they were really really happy,’ but she was like, ‘We’re going to do more than just feed them for a week. We’re going to do sustainability.’ This is going to last for a month, or even longer, and it’s going to be more than food. We were providing food, but good food that lasts.”

Hometown involvement from afar

As the days wore on, and Fulfer reached more and more people who he could help, the financial resources he had taken to Tanzania with him were depleted.

“This is the coolest thing. Didn’t really have internet. I had to ask my wife (Tessa) if she would set something up. We ended up setting up a GoFundMe that was set up with the community here (in Joseph).”

The GoFundMe link describes Fulfer getting set to visit the market to buy food to feed families.

It had a designated goal amount of \$100.

“Within 24 hours, it made two grand,” he said. “And we spent every penny within a week. But I just had to keep doing it — bought uniforms, paid for kids’ school for a year. It was cool the amount of impact we were able to make, and that was with the overwhelming support from this community.”

Hope for humanity

Fulfer said that despite the severe lack that people in the east African country live with, there was no shortage of one item — joy.

“I was not prepared for the living conditions. I thought I knew, but I thought that would be just in the slums. That was everywhere. The living conditions that they have (were shocking), but

(so was) how incredibly happy they were with what we would consider nothing, where they are fighting every day for food, for clothing, maybe walking around with no shoes, and they don’t know if they’re going to get their next meal,” he said. “They don’t have running water, they don’t have any of that, but still, every single person it seemed like I met, (was) so nice, so kind, so outgoing and wanting to help. ... The children would give you the shirt off their back to help anybody. That was very touching to see. And that was every day.

“I remember feeling so much hope about humanity being where I was at. They have nothing, but they were still appreciative of every ounce that they do have. That’s a very teachable moment, and I want our community here to see that. I think that it would make them feel a lot better about our world.”

Spreading like wildfire

There is almost something coincidental of Fulfer, who fights wildfires, wanting to pass the passion he has built for service to others and have it “spread like wildfire,” as he put it.

It’s safe to say he would not be opposed to having this one burn out of control.

“What I want to do is instill the passion to my students to start doing the same thing and then pass it on,” he said. “I remember when I first started teaching, my goal was to make an impact on one student to where they in turn, later on, made an impact on another student. And so, I want it to spread like wildfire. If I do more, do more, teach, teach, preach, preach, preach, and actually do the stuff I talk about as much as possible, I’m hoping that will be infectious to my students.”

Sparks are already being kindled. Fulfer said a pair of fundraisers within the walls of the Joseph school have raised more than \$700. And several students in Fulfer’s classes have expressed interest in doing service or mission trips, whether it be through an organization like IVHQ or a faith-based group.

“I do know that there are students here that (faith is) one of the main pushes. They do want to go, and I think there is a church here that goes to Mexico,” he said. “I know there are students that (faith is) going to be their driving force, which is awesome.”

As for Fulfer, he is nowhere close to being done in Africa. He is already working on plans for his next trip — one in which he hopes to take others along with. He intends to continue working in Arusha in the immediate future, but is open to helping in other areas down the road; he mentioned Uganda and Jordan as two possibilities.

“Maybe after this next trip I’ll go to another spot and do the same thing, because I’m not done,” he said. “Gonna bring a group, going to go here and do as much as we possibly can.”

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