

BWE GIVES BACK

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DAN MOTT

RAISES FUNDS TO HELP THOUSANDS OF SIERRA LEONIAN VILLAGERS

By LUCY FELDMAN

Villagers in Sierra Leone, Africa may live 5,000 miles away from the US on less than \$1 a day, but Bellwether Enterprise Senior Vice President Dan Mott recognizes everyone's core similarities.

"They have the same passions as we do, they get up, they have family, they're trying to live their lives," he said.

Through his friendship with Jeff Hall, founder of OneVillage Partners (OVP), Dan has discovered a passion for giving back and making a difference in improving the lives of thousands of Sierra Leoneans.



Children from the village of Massayiema received a new water well from Dan's most recent Rotary Global Grant.

“If you try to solve all the world's problems, you're never going to solve any of them. But if you just help somebody make their life a little better, you can really make an impact.”



A villager from the Nianahun village constructs a latrine funded by Dan's grant.

Through his involvement with his local Rotary Club in Minnesota, Dan raises money by writing grants for OVP in support of his friend's cause.

"It really comes down to the friendship and the passion that I see in Jeff and his willingness to roll up his sleeves and grow this organization," he said. "So that's really what's driving it for me. I see a means where I can help in something that he's passionate about."

Jeff Hall founded OVP in the mid 2000s after witnessing the devastating effects from the Sierra Leone Civil War that lasted from 1991 to 2002. Jeff had traveled to Sierra Leone with the Peace Corp in the late 1980s, and it was the strong relationships he built while living there that compelled him to return after the war.

Many of the villages were completely wiped out during the war. Essentially everything was completely decimated in many communities, including homes, water wells, and sanitary systems. When villagers returned home to their former communities, they built temporary homes made of mud and clay, using tarps for roofs. In short time, the tarps became worn and ineffective at stopping rainfall from entering their homes. Because people couldn't afford metal roofs, illness was rampant, especially during the rainy season.

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According to The World Bank, one of the world's largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, the life expectancy during the peak of the civil war in Sierra Leone was about 36 years old.

Jeff knew that if the people in Sierra Leone even just had basic shelter, their quality of life would improve.

When he returned home from his trip in 2005, he was committed to raising money to pay for new metal roofs for as many people in Sierra Leone as he could. One of his first efforts was raising money through pledges per mile that he ran during the Twin Cities Marathon. This fundraiser is how Dan first got involved in supporting Sierra Leone communities.



OVP's Community Action Program taking place in the Baaka village of Sierra Leone.

Jeff's fundraising efforts evolved from there until he was able to get OVP registered as a 501(c)(3) in 2010, with the mission to help people in extreme poverty become more self-sufficient.

"It's not to always be working with the villages, but it's to help people get back — not just back on their feet — but stepped up from extreme poverty to where they have more control over their own lives," Jeff said.

OVP achieves this goal by implementing community-led projects and leadership training. And rather than choosing initiatives itself, OVP works with the community to have them define and prioritize what projects they deem necessary to undertake.

OVP currently offers two kinds of training programs. One is a leadership training where local Sierra Leonian OVP staff members teach problem solving and project management skills so people are able to take ownership over improving their community. The other is a women's empowerment program, where women are taught basic financial and budgeting skills to foster gender equity within the family structure and village decision-making processes.

Jeff said part of the goal is for the villages to no longer need the intervention of OVP. He said OVP will always be willing to serve as a resource for them, but the aim is for the communities to become independent.

And that goal has already begun to come to fruition. The living situations in many of the villages OVP first got involved with have improved from not having clean water or functioning roofs to the point where many people are experiencing disposable income.

OVP's initial efforts started in three villages but has since grown to 1. Jeff said OVP employs 45 Sierra Leoneans and estimates it has served around 25,000 locals.

Critical to the organization's growth, Jeff said, is the involvement of individuals and organizations back in the US like Dan and his Rotary club. Rotary is an international organization with more than 1.2 million members. Through Rotary grants established by Dan, OVP has been able to raise more than \$110,000, affecting the lives of more than 10,000 Sierra Leonians.

Dan wrote his first Rotary grant in 2009 to raise funds for the construction of water wells and latrines in various Sierra Leone villages. Through donations and matching funds with district Rotary clubs and Rotary International, his first grant raised around \$52,000.

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Recently, Dan wrote a second grant amounting to around \$66,000 to fund even more infrastructure initiatives within the villages. Each of these grants made up about 10% of the OVP annual budget dedicated towards building wells and latrines.

And Dan's involvement doesn't stop at writing grants and raising money. Being the lead on the grants and having experience in the industry, Dan has the responsibility of reviewing the construction plans and supervising the projects to ensure everything promised is executed and satisfactory.

"Dan's been pretty involved from the beginning," Jeff said. "He's been a super strong supporter of our work. He really understands what we do, and he really gets it. As a friend I've been really grateful for that. He's been a very strong advocate in the Real Estate community throughout the Twin Cities."

Ultimately, Dan said his passion for giving back to OVP stems in his desire to help the world become a better place.

"I know that sounds like a far-reaching goal and I think if you try to solve all the world's problems, you're never going to solve any of them. But if you just help somebody make their life a little better, you can really make an impact."

In addition to receiving funding from various grants and donations from organizations and individuals, OVP hosts two annual fundraisers. The most recent fundraising event was held Oct. 10 where more than 400 people gathered for a light breakfast during which OVP gave an update on the organization. In addition to various speakers, they shared a short video that featured local Sierra Leoneans speaking directly to their donors about the impact OVP has on their lives. The bi-annual fundraisers routinely raise between \$125,000-\$150,000 each.



OVP's Minneapolis Real Estate event is an annual fundraiser that routinely raises six-figures.



(From left) Fred Semmer, Club 9; Mary Kurth, Bloomington Rotary; Dan Mott, Bellwether Enterprise and Edina Rotary; Jeff Hall, Chairman and Founder of OneVillage Partners, and Shelly Loberg, Edina Rotary, at the Oct. 10, 2019 fundraiser.

"The goal is to bring our support together so people see that they're a part of a much bigger organization than just themselves," Jeff said. "We try to convey that even though they live in extreme poverty, the people are joyful and live a very happy life. People come out feeling inspired and they realize that they can have a huge impact."

OVP's future is bright with ample opportunities for new initiatives and growth, Jeff said. Part of their strategic plan is to get villages to collaborate on regional issues they can solve together.

Dan looks forward to continuing his involvement as the organization grows. He has not yet had the chance to visit Sierra Leone, but said he intends to travel there soon to see the newly constructed projects and meet the people his efforts have impacted.

To learn more about OneVillage Partners or to donate, visit onevillagepartners.org.