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St. Mary's soccer league sends equipment to African children

Nettles delivers gear to refugee camp

Wednesday, May 7, 2008

By JEANNE MURRAY
Staff writer

When Harriet Nettles flew to Ghana last summer, and again in December, she took along some unusual baggage: cleats, balls, jerseys and other equipment donated by the Northern Soccer League.

Nettles was traveling to Buduburam Refugee Settlement, a camp for Liberian refugees who fled the West African country during its long civil war. The gear was for the children living at the camp.

Nettles, who lives in Mechanicsville, has a long history of work in Africa – and a personal connection to soccer. She first traveled to Africa as a college student, and was impressed by the “hospitality [and] generosity” of the people, even “when they had nothing.”

A few years ago, a friend of Nettles’ suggested she go back to Africa. Nettles had suffered a head injury in a car accident, putting her career as a college professor on hold. Her friend saw she was at loose ends, and suggested she attend a youth leadership conference sponsored by the Apeadu Peace Center.

The group went to a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana, where up to 40,000 refugees lived in “dreadful conditions,” said Nettles. Diseases like typhoid and dysentery were commonplace. “We felt we had to do something,” said Nettles.

At the camp, Nettles met Lawrence Yealue, who had lost his family, including 12 brothers and sisters, in the Lutheran Church Massacre in Monrovia in 1990. Yealue fled to Ivory Coast, and later ended up in the refugee camp in Ghana, said Nettles. “Soccer and music were the two things that kept [Yealue] going,” said Nettles.

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How to help

For more information on ways to help Liberian refugees, including donations of soccer equipment and monetary donations, contact Harriet Nettles at 301-884-2210 or h_netttles@att.net.

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During her third summer at the camp, said Nettles, Yealue “asked if we had room in our family for him.” Today, Nettles’ family is putting Yealue, whom they consider their adopted son, through Wisconsin International University in Ghana.

Maryland has a long connection with Liberia, Nettles pointed out.

The settlement of Maryland in West Africa was founded in the 1830s by free blacks from the state of Maryland. The colony gained its independence in 1854, and the Republic of Maryland was a free nation until it joined Liberia as Maryland County about three years later. The state of Maryland signed a sister state agreement with Liberia’s Bong and Maryland counties in August 2007.

The purpose of a sister-state relationship is to “promote people to people exchanges throughout the world,” said Mendy Nitsch, director of international affairs in the office of Maryland’s Secretary of State. A mission to Liberia is planned for early June. “As Americans, we have such a deep responsibility” to help in Africa, said Nettles.

Last August, when she was planning to go to the refugee camp with the One World Youth Project, a sister-school project for middle and high school students, Nettles contacted Barry Lewis, president of the Northern Soccer League. Lewis said he was happy to donate the equipment on behalf of the league. “The benefits from sports ... go far beyond the sport itself,” he said. “It’s a great thing to do for kids in other countries.”

The league also donated equipment to African children last year through Russ Miller, parent of a player on a Northern Soccer League select team – “enough to outfit four teams,” said Lewis.

“Maybe someday a photographer will be taking pictures [of African children], and we’ll see Northern Soccer League shirts,” said Lewis.

In December, Nettles went back to Ghana with a group called Mediators Beyond Borders, which provided mediation training for 60 people at the refugee camp. “What these people really need is a way to avoid war,” said Nettles.

Nettles gave the equipment to children that play on teams organized by the Respect Club, an international organization based in Canada that aims to improve the conditions of refugees.

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