

Kitchener teacher's Ugandan experience stirs new appreciation for life back home

By Valerie Hill, Record staff

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KITCHENER — At 29, teacher Jennifer Loeb sack travelled to Africa hoping to improve the lives of Ugandans and instead found new appreciation for her own privileged life in Canada.

"When I came back, I thought maybe I need to re-evaluate me," said Loeb sack, a Grade 6 teacher at King Edward Public School. She recently participated in the Jane Goodall Institute of Canada's teacher training workshops in Uganda where primary school teachers are trained to incorporate environmental education into their curriculum through lesson plans, games and activities.

The program (www.janegoodall.ca) was launched in 2008 and recruits teachers who must raise \$2,500 each before embarking on the three-week stint. Loeb sack said she travelled with five Canadians, including Angela Hoselton of Cobourg, a supply teacher with the Waterloo Region District School Board.

Loeb sack said she and her friend Carla Taylor of Grand Bend had been seeking a summer adventure, but one with a purpose.

"I've always had the travel bug," said Loeb sack, who completed her teachers training in Australia and did a teaching practicum in China. That overseas experience made her hungry for more. It was Taylor who came upon the online application in February, two days before the deadline. They were accepted and had to scramble to raise the cash before departure.

On July 1 the group landed in Entebbe, Uganda where they received orientation and a curriculum from the institute. They then headed out to lead their own workshops with 28 Ugandan primary teachers (seven were women) who travelled from around the country, all paid for by the institute. In a country where teachers receive little professional development, such an opportunity was rare and there was the expectation that the teachers would return to their home schools and pass on what they learned.

Armed with a basic guideline curriculum, Loeb sack admitted they "took what they wanted us to teach and



Uganda traveller. Kitchener teacher Jennifer Loeb sack sits next to a hand-carved representation of a Crested Crane, the national bird of Uganda. Loeb sack spent three weeks there working with the Jane Goodall Institute Canada. Record staff Source: Record staff

made it our own" and along the way discovered there were plenty of simple techniques that could make a big difference.

When the Canadian teachers toured a few schools, they saw conditions spanning from well-equipped classrooms to schools of mud and reed with dirt floors.

"Some schools had a gully running right through the school," she said, adding the gullies were so deep from water run off that children occasionally fell in.

One impressive project was the school where science students were taught to grow mushrooms, which were then harvested and sold to the community, providing additional income for the school.

The Canadian teachers offered simple solutions to problems such as how to dispose of human waste so it wasn't running into the same river where people drank and bathed.

"We focused on the small things they can do," Loeb sack said. On a more national scale, she learned the country faces serious environmental challenges including deforestation, agriculture intensification as well as threats to endangered primates such as chimpanzees and mountain gorillas. One community had been shooting the baboons raiding their crops but found a better solution by planting fruit trees and providing water on the nearby hills, effectively keeping the animals away.

As eager as the Canadians were to help the Ugandans, they also learned much from them, particularly in how easy it is in Canada to take their lives for granted. One teacher asked how many children Loeb sack had in her Kitchener classroom. She responded with "18."

"He said 'I bet you complained about it,'" she said. In fact, she did and felt a little foolish when he said his class had 98 students and 23 text books to go around. The Ugandans were also amazed she didn't sleep at school back home during the week, that she owned her own car, her own house and at 29, was neither married nor had children. That's not to say she thought the Ugandans envied her for they seemed happy and content with their lives. One woman she met had married well and moved to the city where she had many luxuries, only to return after a few years to the shack in her village where she was most comfortable and at peace and where at dawn, she woke to the view of a lush valley.

For Ugandans, there are always serious problems, of corrupt governments, poor sanitation, no waste disposal, limited domestic and personal hygiene. "Clean water is a massive issue," she added.

When Loeb sack returns to her Kitchener classroom in September, it will be with renewed enthusiasm for both the environment and her local community, which she will share with her students through programs such as Goodall Foundation's Roots and Shoots program which engages young people to make a difference.

As for the Ugandan teachers, she believes the Canadians made a difference.

"I think they left motivated. They left with big smiles."

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